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LORD BLACKSHIRT

ANOTHER joyous escapade in the career of the son of Blackshirt, ex-Squadron-Leader Anthony Verell, D.S.O., alias 'Lord Blackshirt'; ably abetted by Penelope, whose sheer audacity and craving for excitement match his own reckless temperament.

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LORD BLACKSHIRT

THE SON OF BLACKSHIRT
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CHAPTER ONE

"GOOD MORNING, MR. STEVENS. WILL YOU SIT DOWN?" THE Assistant Commissioner moved aside some papers which he had been studying and settled back in his chair. "The Chief Constable tells me that you wish to speak to me on an unusual matter."

Superintendent Stevens—"Big Bill" to all at New Scotland Yard—sat down opposite Sir Arthur Summers. "Yes and no, sir. The man who really desires an interview with you is Detective-Sergeant George Grant."

"Grant! Grant! I do not recollect his name at the moment."

"I did not think you would, sir. You have not yet come into direct contact with him. So far he has handled only routine cases."

Sir Arthur smiled. "In other words, he has not been connected with those crimes which a newspaper man would probably delight in labelling spectacular?"

"That is so, sir. For all that, the Chief Constable has already noted his name for early promotion. He is conscientious and hard-working, and, if I may add a personal opinion, I should say that he has one of the keenest, shrewdest brains in this building."

The Assistant Commissioner expressed surprise. "Coming from your lips, Mr. Stevens, that is a recommendation which I respect."

"Thank you, sir."

"Why does he want to see me?"

"Well, sir, he has put forward an unusual request to be assigned to a case which does not officially exist. I must confess that I did not care to do this upon my own responsibility."

"The request is certainly an unusual one," Sir Arthur murmured drily. "What are the particulars of this case of which, officially, we have no knowledge?"

"May I request, sir, that you permit Grant to tell his story first-hand?"

"Is that the reason for his requesting an interview with me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I assume that you know the gist of what Grant wishes to tell me?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you consider I should give his story my personal attention?"

"Well, sir, he has made out a very strong argument."

Sir Arthur laughed. "But you are not entirely convinced?"

"Again I must answer yes and no, sir. I believe that there are grounds for Grant's deductions, but whether they are sufficient to justify his being assigned to investigate them is a matter on which I should prefer your decision."

"You are arousing my curiosity, Mr. Stevens." Sir Arthur reflected for a few moments, glanced at his watch, then nodded his head. "Very well, I will see Mr. Grant. Will you have him come to this office while I sign some letters? And remain here yourself, Mr. Stevens."

"Yes, sir."

Some minutes later Stevens ushered Detective-Sergeant Grant into the office of the Assistant Commissioner of the Criminal Investigation Department. Grant was a man of thirty-five years of age. In height he was slightly above medium, but his waistline was beginning to betray the fact that he was past his first youth. His hair, too, was equally truthful, for there was a vague sprinkling of white about the ears. His face was ruddy, his eyes light blue. In no way was his appearance outstanding; but there was a suggestion of self-confidence in his manner, and an alert expression in his eyes which seemed to justify Stevens's praise of his intelligence.

After Stevens had introduced the sergeant to the Assistant Commissioner, Sir Arthur indicated a chair on the far side of the room.

"Will you bring that chair over for yourself, Mr. Grant, and sit down?"

This Grant did.

"Now, Mr. Grant, I am ready to listen to what you have to say. You can take your time. I am in no immediate hurry."

"May I consult my note-book, sir?" Grant asked.

"Of course."

The sergeant pulled a well-thumbed, black-covered note-book from his pocket.

"The notes which I have in this book, sir, cover a period of nearly twelve months."

"*Twelve months, Mr. Grant?*" The Assistant Commissioner was startled. "If there is anything in what you are about to tell me—of which I know no details whatever, I might add—surely you have allowed a long period of time to elapse before speaking of the matter to your superior officers! I presume you are going to speak of a crime?"

"Of a series of—of strange incidents, sir."

"A series!" A rasp entered Sir Arthur's voice. "Well?"

"May I explain, sir, that it was only four weeks ago that I first put two and two together."

"But your notes go back twelve months?"

"Yes, sir. But not all concern my own assignments. Some of the notes have been written down during this last month, and are taken from the note-books of fellow members of the investigation department."

"I see. Well, begin your story, Mr. Grant."

"Thank you, sir. Exactly eleven months, two weeks and three days ago I was given orders to proceed to the residence of a Mr. Murger—Mr. Peter Murger, of sixteen, Bellemont Gardens, Chelsea. The previous evening Mr. Murger had reported an outbreak of fire in his study. The Fire Brigade had dealt with the outbreak promptly enough to get the fire under control before it had spread beyond the one room, but while investigating the cause of fire Captain Walsh reached the conclusion that the fire had begun as the result of arson."

Sir Arthur glanced at the superintendent. "Arson! In Bellemont Gardens! Not quite the neighbourhood from which one would expect to have arson reported. Go on, Mr. Grant."

"Before calling at the house I interviewed Captain Walsh. I do not think it essential to give you the details now, sir, but Captain Walsh suspected Mr. Murger himself of being the culprit; apparently Mr. Murger's attitude was suspicious. In consequence of Captain Walsh's report, therefore, I called upon Mr. Murger to make further enquiries."

"As a result of my enquiries I found sufficient evidence to convince me that Captain Walsh's suspicions as to the cause of fire were justified, but not his selection of the guilty party. Mr. Murger was able to prove as satisfactory an alibi as is possible in the circumstances."

"What do you mean by those last few words, Mr. Grant?"

"Well, sir, it is possible to manufacture a delayed-action fire-bomb which will not ignite until the expiration of several days."

"Ah yes! Of course!"

"Later enquiries confirmed this opinion. Far from there being any reason for Mr. Murger to set his study alight, the fire had caused him irreparable damage, by destroying some antique manuscripts, which he had not troubled to insure. On the other hand, his attitude was not quite that of an innocent person. He appeared to me to be trying to conceal something, though I could not make out what that something was."

"Or somebody?" Sir Arthur interpolated.

"Or somebody," Grant promptly agreed. "Subsequently I discovered that Mr. Murger's reputation was not an enviable one. I learned, from one of my colleagues, that he was suspected of having amassed a small fortune from the Black Market during the war. Nothing ever came of our enquiries into the fire, and eventually the case was pigeon-holed. But before leaving the question of Mr. Murger's fire there are two points I want to emphasize. The first concerns a scrap of paper which I found in the burned room. It was a small scrap, and all that remained of a regulation Post Office Letter Card. On one side were the words: 'ger, Esq.,' and on the other: 'must repay'."

"The second point is this, sir. Two months after the fire Mr. Murger moved into a very much smaller and cheaper house, since which time he has lived, apparently, on a much reduced scale." Grant paused for a moment or two as if expecting Sir Arthur to speak. The Assistant Commissioner said nothing, so presently Grant continued.

"That is all I have to say concerning Mr. Murger. As an isolated incident the fire was of little importance, but I hope to prove to you, sir, that it was one incident in the chain of many. The next case which I should like to mention was handled by Detective-Inspector Spicer, but I have the pertinent details noted down."

"Ten months ago it came to the knowledge of the C.I.D. that the youngest daughter of Sir William Rux had been abducted

Sir Arthur raised his hand. "I can remember the details of the case, Mr. Grant. We only heard of the abduction after the daughter had been safely returned to Sir William. He seemed unwilling to collaborate with us in tracing the kidnapper, and as the child was returned safely, and as Sir William was not forced to pay out any ransom money, we were unable to proceed further."

"Yes, sir, but I want to underline Sir William's unwillingness to collaborate with the police, also to point out that Sir William was Chairman of Inter-Continental Holdings Trust, whose failure was responsible for at least five bankruptcies."

The A.C. frowned. "I recollect the failure. The Director of Public Prosecutions contemplated proceedings against Sir William for criminal fraud, but he had cleverly remained within the law, and the matter had to be dropped."

"Exactly, sir. It is all the more strange, therefore, that a few months ago the five bankrupts all secured their discharge after paying their creditors in full. From information received I have learned that each of the bankrupts received the money which paid their debts in the form of banknotes, sent in a registered letter from a firm of solicitors in Chancery Lane, who wrote that the money was a gift from Sir William, to be used for the purpose of securing a discharge from bankruptcy."

"Hum! A case of guilty conscience, Mr. Grant."

"Perhaps, sir, but two days ago, when I was in Chancery Lane, I thought it might be interesting to see what kind of offices this firm of solicitors occupied. The firm's name was not among the list of people occupying that building, so I enquired of the caretaker the address to which the firm had moved. The caretaker had never heard of the firm in question."

"Your story is most extraordinary, Mr. Grant. Have you checked the caretaker's story?"

"Yes, sir. There never has been a firm of solicitors by the name of Mortimer, Greer and Sankey."

The Assistant Commissioner nodded his head as a sign to the sergeant to continue. Grant consulted his note-book.

"Do you recollect the name of Mr. Kurt Stynkluck, sir?"

"Stynkluck. Stynkluck. Ah yes! The man who swindled the Treasury—er—was alleged to have swindled the Treasury of nearly one hundred thousand pounds. The jury brought in a verdict of Not Guilty. In the light of Mr. Justice Menckin's summing-up there was no other possible verdict. He was fined, if I remember correctly, five thousand pounds on a second, technical count. The case caused a temporary sensation, I remember, the accused being cheered in Court after his acquittal."

"Yes, sir, but not on account of his successful manipulation of finance. The public was much less interested in the one hundred thousand pounds than in the fact that Kurt Stynkluck is one of the finest amateur exponents of Chopin. High finance

and Chopin is a rare combination, and one calculated to arouse public interest."

Sir Arthur smiled drily. "Among the unaccountable mysteries of this unaccountable world, the taste of public interest occupies a foremost place, Mr. Grant. The public could not believe that a man whose passion in life was the playing of Chopin could possibly be guilty of fraudulent manipulation of accounts. If the private ledger of the accused had not met with such unfortunate destruction at the time of the fire in his office the members of the public might not have had the opportunity of cheering an acquittal."

"May I ask a question, sir?"

"Of course."

"At the time of his trial I was still in the Army. By the time I was demobilized Superintendent Pond had retired from the C.I.D. and had gone to Australia. There is no real doubt about Stynkluck's guilt, is there?"

The Assistant Commissioner glanced at Stevens. "Within these four walls I think we can admit that there was no doubt, can we not, Mr. Stevens?"

Stevens chuckled. "Yes, sir. In my opinion the devil must have been protecting that man. His wife practically admitted to Superintendent Pond that her husband had defrauded the Treasury of the money."

"Does that answer your question, Mr. Grant?"

"It does, sir."

"Why are you interested in Kurt Stynkluck?"

"Because of the motor accident in which he was involved, eight months ago."

"The accident which robbed him of two fingers?"

"Yes, sir. Stynkluck will never play Chopin again."

"Divine retribution!" Stevens exclaimed.

"Retribution—but not divine," Grant corrected.

Sir Arthur's keen eyes scrutinized the sergeant's face. "What are you inferring, Mr. Grant?"

"The details of the accident were as follows, sir. Last June Mr. Stynkluck visited some friends who were living not far from Amersham, in Buckinghamshire. He left the house just after eleven p.m. and drove away in his car, with the object of returning to London. Not long afterwards a Mr. and Mrs. Rankin, of Ealing, saw a car overturned in the ditch beside the road. They stopped their own car, ran to the overturned car, and saw a man

inside, unconscious. They dragged him out of the car, and found his face and hands spattered with blood. They immediately rushed him off to the Uxbridge hospital, where it was seen that two fingers of his right hand had been smashed, necessitating their immediate amputation.

"As the accident had taken place in Buckinghamshire, the Bucks police made enquiries into the cause of the accident. In questioning the doctor and nurses who performed the operation it was learned that Stynkluck's breath smelled strongly of alcohol. Examination of the car revealed only a minimum of damage to the car itself. There were bloodstains on the jamb of the offside door, just above the handle, also microscopic pieces of flesh. It was concluded that the injured man had been driving under the influence of drink, that he had steered the car into the ditch, but that, at the last moment, realizing that an accident was inevitable, he had opened the offside door, and made the first move, too late, towards jumping out."

Grant paused, to glance at his note-book, but he quickly looked up again, and resumed.

"There was some evidence against this theory, sir, for the friends of Mr. Stynkluck, whom he had visited, testified that he had had no more than three drinks during all the time he had been in the house. A cocktail before the meal, a glass of Burgundy during the meal, and a glass of whisky immediately before leaving the house."

Sir Arthur frowned slightly. "Scarcely sufficient to render a man intoxicated."

"Nor to make his breath smell strongly of liquor, sir."

"What was Stynkluck's story?"

"He had very little to say, sir. At the request of the Buckinghamshire Police, Detective-Sergeant Brown of the Metropolitan Police—since transferred to the Central Branch—questioned Mr. Stynkluck in the hospital at Uxbridge. Mr. Stynkluck's story was that nothing was very clear in his mind, therefore he could not say how the accident occurred. And there the matter rests."

"I see! Is it possible that that last whisky affected Stynkluck?"

"Possible, but not probable, sir. He was not a hardened drinker, but nor was he so teetotal that a small whisky might upset him to the extent of causing an accident."

"Then what is your theory, Mr. Grant?"

For the first time since his appearance in the Assistant Commissioner's room the sergeant revealed signs of hesitancy.

"Well, sir," he began uneasily, "I have outlined three cases in which the men concerned were involved in accidents which can be described only as strange and unusual. Notwithstanding the fact that in each case loss or damage was incurred, each of the three sufferers subsequently refused to answer questions frankly. A close study of each individual case suggests that the sufferer has resented police interference in his private affairs.

"I have half a dozen other cases noted down in this book, sir, and in every one certain factors recur. One: that a certain person has suffered a hurt, or injury, or damage. Two: the sufferer has, whenever possible, tried to conceal from the police either the hurt, or injury, or damage itself, and when it has not been possible to keep the matter from police notice, then the victim has refused to co-operate with the police in having the incident properly investigated. Three: in five of the six cases the reputation of the victim has not been above suspicion."

"Go on, Mr. Grant."

"In short, sir, I have reached a conclusion that there is in London at the present time a group of persons unknown who have constituted themselves into a private organization for the punishment of those who have offended against the canons of decency and morality and yet have contrived to remain within the law."

"Somebody has been reading Edgar Wallace's *Four Just Men* too well, and not wisely," Sir Arthur murmured.

Steven's eyes twinkled. "And Robin Hood, sir."

The Assistant Commissioner's lips twitched. "Quite true, Mr. Stevens. The righting of other people's wrongs is a well-tried plot, and one of the hardest among fiction perennials." For a few seconds he gazed reflectively at the white blotting-pad in front of him. Then he lifted his head again and faced Stevens.

"What do you think of Mr. Grant's theory, Mr. Stevens?"

"Well, sir, at first hearing it seems too fantastic to be credible. But a closer examination of the facts certainly supports his theory. When Sergeant Grant first mentioned it to me I instituted a few enquiries. Mr. Peter Murger, for instance, possesses a character wholly ostentatious. I cannot believe that he would willingly have lived a quieter life in a cheaper neighbourhood. He might have lost money on the Stock Exchange, but if so he did not do so in the name of Peter Murger. On the other hand, I

have learned that, on the fifteenth of March last, he sold Government securities to the value of some twenty-five thousand pounds. Two days after paying into his bank the cheque in settlement he withdrew from his balance the round sum of twenty-five thousand pounds. On the second of April the Chancellor of the Exchequer acknowledged the receipt of that exact sum in the advertisement columns of *The Times*. You may perhaps remember that some of the daily newspapers featured the anonymous gift to the Chancellor."

"Yes, I do. Then it may be that this alleged organization blackmailed Murger into returning some of his Black Market profits to the public benefit?"

"It is easy—perhaps too easy, sir—to believe that such was the case."

"And Sir William Rux was similarly blackmailed, by a threat to his daughter, into refunding money to the principal shareholders in the Inter-Continental Holdings Trust?"

"Yes, sir."

"But is there any evidence of Kurt Stynkluck's being blackmailed?"

"No, sir. Stynkluck, I take it, was not blackmailed. He had nothing to fear from exposure, because he had already been tried for the fraud against the Treasury, and acquitted. But to play Chopin probably meant more to him than his fortune. He was punished by losing two fingers."

"I agree." Sir Arthur transferred his attention to Grant. "What is your reason for telling me of these—er—incidents?"

"To request, sir, that I may be assigned to investigate the whole series."

"Have you suspicions as to the identity of the people concerned?" the A.C. asked sharply.

"No, sir."

Sir Arthur pursed his lips. "You are asking rather a lot, Mr. Grant. Despite curious but circumstantial evidence to support your theory, it remains very nebulous. To relieve you from all other duties at the moment would be to chase a shadow at the expense of the substance. You must know that a crime wave is sweeping through the country at this present time, and that we have not a sufficient number of reliable men to cope with it."

Grant was not able to conceal his disappointment. "I do

realize that, sir, but as a member of a police force it offends me that our functions as upholders of law and order are being usurped by a few unauthorized criminals."

"I appreciate your sentiments, Mr. Grant, which do you credit. I also sympathize with them. But your undoubted enthusiasm for your work makes you all the more valuable to us during these present times."

"There is another aspect, sir——" Grant began eagerly.

"Well?"

"If once the identity of these criminals were established we might not then have to rely upon the collaboration of their victims in the event of a prosecution. If the victims will not give us any information, how are the criminals to be prosecuted?"

Sir Arthur nodded his head. "Quite true. How do you propose to commence?"

"I don't know, sir," Grant admitted readily. "But I have a feeling that it might prove worth my while to spend some time in a few of the night-clubs." He saw the expression on Sir Arthur's face, and forestalled the inevitable question. "Most of the victims to date were, or are, in the habit of frequenting night-clubs, sir."

"I see." Once again Sir Arthur remained silent, this time for a full minute or more. At last he spoke.

"I will agree that you have made out a case, Mr. Grant. It might be worth your while investigating the series of incidents you have noted down. At the same time, as I have already indicated, we cannot afford entirely to dispense with your services. However, it might be possible to make some arrangement for you to do less routine work, and to give some part of your time to the other investigation. What do you say, Mr. Stevens?"

"I think that arrangement is worth a trial, sir."

"Then I will leave it to you to make the necessary dispositions." Sir Arthur stood up. The other men did likewise.

"Good luck, Mr. Grant. And if you should effect an arrest——"

Grant's eyes shone eagerly.

"I think I can promise you early promotion," Sir Arthur concluded.

CHAPTER TWO

TONY VERRELL WAS UNMISTAKABLY COMFORTABLE. THERE WAS a blazing fire in the grate, and the glowing heat which it threw out was enough to scorch the breeks of anyone standing before it. The deep, springy chair in which Tony was well and truly sunk was immediately in front of that fire. His crossed feet were lodged in a vulgar, but devilishly satisfying, position—on the mantelpiece—precariously occupying the almost-insufficient space between a clock, which ticked away the seconds with ponderous solemnity, and a rose-shaded electric light. His hands were thrust deeply into his pockets. From his lightly clenched teeth dangled Agnes, his favourite pipe. A radio, within arm's length, filled the room with cheerful music.

Altogether, the room presented a scene of domestic, if solitary, felicity, from which an outsider would have concluded that here was a perfect picture of a man thoroughly at peace with himself, and the rest of the world.

In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred that onlooker would have been perfectly right. Every one of ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have delighted in being able selfishly to occupy the whole of the fire, in being able to place his feet on the mantel without anyone's saying nay, in smoking the foulest of foul pipes without evoking a murmur of justified protest, in being able to listen to *his* choice of music.

But Tony Verrell was not at peace with himself, even if he was with the rest of the world. Tony was not wholeheartedly enjoying the sublime peacefulness of that warm, cheerful, solitary room. As a matter of fact Tony was decidedly restless and unsettled. His thoughts were a hundred miles away—well, say twenty miles away. He was not enjoying the music, because he was not consciously hearing it. He was not even enjoying Agnes, and that was the worst sign of all, for Agnes was an old, and well-tried, companion.

Tony was not at peace because he was at peace, a paradox not as incomprehensible as it sounds. The trouble with Tony was that he had inherited from his father a nature which craved adventure; not just isolated incidents of breathless, pulsating

adventure, but persistent adventure—days, weeks, months of adventure—adventure for breakfast, adventure for lunch, adventure for supper. While he had been in the R.A.F. he had been able to satisfy that craving to his heart's content. But with the Armistice came an end to flirtation with death. No more was the steel of his courage tempered in the fire and delirium of aerial combat. Life once more resumed its normal, placid tempo, while the dashing heroes of yesterday settled down to become the domesticated husbands and fathers of today.

Tony's warm, reckless eyes danced as he stared into the red heart of the fire and lived again some of the highlights of his career in the R.A.F. That morning over Dymchurch, for instance, when he had gleefully flung his machine at an oncoming flight of Heinkels, and had miraculously escaped scot-free after shooting one of them down in flames. And another morning, somewhere over the Channel, when he had played tag for ten minutes or more with three Me 110's, only to lose them all in a thundercloud just as he had manœuvred himself on to the tail of their leader. And that late afternoon, when he had led a low attack on Berck aerodrome, only to become entangled with some overhead cables. A ticklish moment, that, but his machine had stood the test; despite pieces torn off here and there; despite a score of bullets in the instrument panel, the old crate had carried him safely back to base.

He lived again some of the nights which remained most vividly in his memory. Exciting nights, some of them, even though the majority had been dull and uneventful. The night when he had brought down two of the enemy raiders within fifteen minutes. The night when an unnoticed raider, coming out of a cloud, had missed his machine literally by a strut's length. The night when he had chased a raider into a balloon barrage, and had had the satisfaction of seeing his enemy plunge down into the darkness, minus a wing. The night over Yorkshire—an otherwise quiet one—when he had seen below what had looked like a tremendous volcanic eruption, and which he later discovered had been the disintegration of a munitions factory. A sad evening, that one. But unforgettable. The belching flames had lighted up his instrument panel for a second or two. . . .

From war his thoughts turned to peace. To another unforgettable night, soon after the Armistice, when he had passed up an Armistice celebration party for the sake of a pair of unfathomable violet eyes. What a night that had been! A milestone in

his life. Perhaps the most important milestone to date. On that night he had transformed himself into an *ersatz* cracksman, and had broken into and entered the old Tudor home of Lady Redbrook, widow of the 1st Earl of Redbrook. Lady Redbrook, so Penelope had said, was virtually being held prisoner by a nephew from South America, with the excuse that she was too ill to receive visitors, for the purpose of inducing her to alter her will in his favour.

Once inside the house disaster had overtaken him. He had tripped over a cat, knocked his head against a wall, and had lost consciousness. On recovering, he had found himself imprisoned in a priest's hole. While looking for a means of escape he had discovered the Diaries of Ralph Rowen, afterwards the 1st Earl of Redbrook. Beginning in the year 1890, the diaries had continued almost to the day of Lord Redbrook's death. Compelled to wait until morning, Tony had read the diaries through, one by one. To make two incredible discoveries. The first, that his father, Richard Verrell, was none other than the missing son of the 1st Earl of Redbrook. Not Richard Verrell, of unknown parentage, but Richard Rowen, 2nd Earl of Redbrook! Which meant that he, Tony, was not Anthony Verrell, but Anthony Rowen, Viscount Roslin!

Lord Roslin! Even now the memory of that discovery made Tony chuckle. In a moment of abstraction Agnes dropped from his mouth, and rolled down his chest into the curved pit of his middle. But as Agnes was no longer alight he let her—or it—remain where she—or it—had rolled, and indulged himself in the full enjoyment of that fantastic joke.

For, in the light of his second discovery, the knowledge that he was really Lord Roslin was no more than a fantastic joke, which would remain so for all time. Lord Roslin he might be, but Lord Roslin he could never publicly claim to be, for Lord Redbrook's diaries had made clear to him, Tony, that not only was his father, Richard Verrell, really the 2nd Earl Redbrook, but also that he was Blackshirt, the notorious cracksman! Blackshirt for whom every police force in the country had once searched in vain. Blackshirt, whose audacious coups were described in more than one police file. Blackshirt, who might still have to stand his trial for crimes now two decades old, for the arm of the law is long, and its memory keen. For Tony Verrell to claim the title by right of being his father's heir, his father would have first to claim the earldom. And the only existing evidence able to

establish Richard Verrell's claim would, at the same time, reveal that he was Blackshirt.

For many the joke of being heir to an earldom which could not be claimed would have been bitter-sweet. Tony had no regrets. Sometimes, in his secret thoughts, he thought of himself as Lord Roslin, but he had no genuine desire to be a courtesy Viscount. He was satisfied with being plain Mr. Anthony Verrell—or, better still, Tony—and from what he knew of his father, he, too, was not likely to lose any sleep in consequence of having remained a commoner. After all, Richard Verrell had reason to be proud of the name which he had adopted in far-off days, and which hard work had made respected and popular.

If Tony had any regrets that his father's double life had made it impossible to claim the earldom, it was on account of Penelope's godmother, sweet old Lady Redbrook, who had mourned the disappearance of her only child for half a life-time. What unutterable joy would be hers if she were to be told that her missing son was alive and well—and what unutterable sadness if she were to learn, at the same time, that her son was Blackshirt! The shock of that discovery had possibly shortened her husband's life. It might well destroy the few years of life which still remained to her.

Tony chuckled again as he pictured his father's expression if he were ever to learn that he was: Redbrook, 2nd Earl of, cr. 1920, Alan Laurie Rowen, Baron Glengordon, 1910, Viscount Roslin, 1920. Of course, he would not believe the information. Fate, in the shape of the drunken sot who had kidnapped him one foggy day, had denied him knowledge of his true identity; he was not likely to believe that story. The devil of mischief would dance in his eyes, and doubtless his quick, alert brain would try to think of some method of turning the tables upon such a practical joker. Richard Verrell was still as ready as ever to accept a challenge, for the years had dealt lightly with him since the days when Blackshirt had practised crime for the sheer adventure of successfully defying and eluding the representatives of law and order. Blackshirt was still Blackshirt at heart, even if he had long ago settled down to a more orderly and domesticated life—save for the several occasions when he had donned his old, familiar black shirt for the sake of his country, and had risked all—his life, his happiness, his reputation—in order to combat and defeat the machinations of a foreign espionage organization.

But of these later occasions Tony knew nothing. All Tony knew of Blackshirt's adventures was of those which had occurred before Blackshirt's marriage; also, that he had inherited from Blackshirt Blackshirt's love of adventure, Blackshirt's audacity, Blackshirt's spirit of devilry. Even Blackshirt's faculty for seeing in the dark, to which faculty had been due much of his success as a night fighter. One other thing Tony knew: that it would cause Richard Verrell intense unhappiness to realize that the secret of his criminal past was known to his adored son. Titles, position, wealth—would any of those make up to Richard Verrell for the knowledge that his son knew him as a notorious cracksman?

Tony knew they would not. Whatever else happened, Richard Verrell must never learn that his son knew him to be Blackshirt.

The son of Blackshirt smiled somewhat wistfully as he continued to gaze into the red heart of the fire. Though Blackshirt would probably never appreciate the fact, Tony cared not a fig that he was the son of Blackshirt. Far from being ashamed of the relationship, he was proud of it. *Proud* of it. He mentally emphasized the word. And why not? Decades ago, force of circumstances had forced Blackshirt into a life of crime. But Blackshirt had lifted himself out of the slough of the criminal underworld, had educated himself, had become a respected light in a different world of talent and literature. Was that not a record of which one might be proud? At any rate, he, the son of Blackshirt, felt proud of it.

The smile became a chuckle, the chuckle a laugh. A laugh of such heartiness that it threatened to hurl Agnes to the floor. But at a critical moment, with Agnes balanced uneasily on the brink, as it were, the telephone rang. Tony's laughter ceased abruptly. He sprang out of the chair, grabbing hold of Agnes as he did so, and made a dash for the other side of the room. With one hand he snapped off the wireless; with the other he picked up the telephone receiver.

"Hullo!" he sang out, his voice warm with hope.

He was not disappointed.

"Good evening, Tony."

"Penny! You dear! It seems months since I last heard your voice."

"It is ten days only," Penelope informed him coolly.

"Nine days too many, anyway. Where are you? In your usual room at the Rex?"

"Yes."

"Have you some news for me, Penny? Lord, I hope so. If you could know how blue I was feeling a few moments ago," he babbled. "I'll come round at once. Expect me——"

"Wait, Tony, wait. Please curb your anxiety long enough to allow me to say a word——"

"As long as it is just the one word 'Yes', Penny. Go on, Penny, be a sport. Say 'Yes'."

"Anthony Verrell, I shall not say anything of the kind. You know my views, and my rules, and if you are not ready to abide by them you need not trouble to meet me tonight."

"You are an unfeeling wench, Penny. I believe you have an icicle instead of a heart, and ice-water instead of warm blood."

"And common sense instead of emotion? You may be right, Tony, so if you do not feel anxious to meet me tonight——"

"But I am," he interrupted hastily. Then he grinned, and added: "I want to hear your news."

"Oh!" she exclaimed shortly. "Very well," she went on, in a voice sharper than usual. "But I do not want you to come to the hotel tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because I want to dance."

"To dance! Penny! You are joking. You are willing to allow me to hold you in my arms, and dance with you?"

"Only if you promise not to pester me with the usual question. If you dare even touch upon the forbidden subject I shall send you right away from me, Tony, and not let you see me again—oh! for months and months."

"If I promise not to ask a certain question may I make love to you?"

"No."

Tony made a wry face. There was a note of finality in Penelope's voice which was discouraging.

"But I may be—nice—to you?"

She relented. "If you are not nice to me, Tony dear, I shall not ask you to take me out again."

"You are a very difficult person to please," he grumbled. "If I am not nice to you you won't go out with me, and if I am too nice you'll send me away."

She laughed—the sound was music in his ears. "You are a ninny, Tony. I believe you talk a lot of nonsense just for the

sake of hearing your own voice." Her voice became more business-like. "Do you know La Belle Lorraine?"

"The night-club?"

"Yes."

"I've heard of it, Penny."

"Then meet me there at ten-fifteen."

"Not until ten-fifteen? There are nearly two hours to go before then."

"I am not dressed yet."

He whistled. "So it's best bib-and-tucker tonight, is it? All the same, couldn't we meet, say, in one hour's time instead of two?"

"No."

He sighed his resignation. "Ten-fifteen it is, Penny darling. But don't you dare be late."

Her only response was a laugh as she disconnected. He grinned as he did the same. Perhaps, after all, she had reason for accusing him of talking for the sake of talking; unlike most women, Penelope made a habit of punctuality. He had never yet known her to be late for an appointment.

II

Precisely at ten o'clock, Tony, after complying with certain formalities, entered the large-sized basement which London's pleasure-seekers knew as La Belle Lorraine. The night-club was among the best in London. Opened by a Frenchman from Lorraine who had fled to England during the war to join the Free French, La Belle Lorraine had quickly achieved a post-war reputation for an unsurpassed cuisine, and a first-class dance band and floor. The more popular the night-club became, the higher Maurice—as the proprietor was generally called—scaled his prices, not only for the purpose of increasing his profits, but also to prevent the club from becoming too crowded. Consequently, it had become known as exclusive, and to Maurice's credit, he had rewarded the popularity of his regular clients by serving them with ever richer dishes, and a consistently excellent cabaret.

This, then, was the club in which Tony found himself at Penelope's command. As he looked around he was approached by Maurice.

"Good evening, monsieur. You are looking for a table, no?"

"A table for two, please."

"*Bien!* But is monsieur one of our members? I do not recognize him."

"I have been a member for exactly thirty seconds."

"*Parfait, monsieur, parfait!*" Maurice smiled his welcoming, confident smile. "I am Maurice, monsieur. And monsieur's name is——"

"Verrell. Anthony Verrell."

"I shall not forget it, monsieur. I never forget a name or a face. A table for two, you said, monsieur. Will your companion be a lady, no?"

"What do you think, Maurice?"

Maurice smiled all over his pleasant fat face as he glanced into Tony's dancing, reckless eyes. "I should think all the mesdemoiselles were either blind or without taste if your companion tonight is to be a man."

"I wish you would convince my companion of that, Maurice."

"Ah! *Je comprends*. A table for two. Intimate, and not too near the band, so that you may hear yourselves talk, no! That table over there, monsieur, in the corner?"

Tony looked at the table and nodded eagerly. "You couldn't have chosen better."

Maurice's eyes twinkled. "It is a special table, monsieur, and always in great demand. I reserve it always for my favourite members. But tonight it pleases me to see it occupied by a hero who did so much to save England from the night bombers."

Tony was astonished. "You know me?"

"Did I not tell you, monsieur, that I never forget a name? The name of Squadron-Leader Anthony Verrell was frequently mentioned in the newspapers during the war." He raised a hand. Immediately a dark, sleek waiter hurried to his side. "Jules, take Monsieur Verrell to table D."

"Table D!" Jules looked startled. "But monsieur——"

"Well?"

"I was reserving the table for Sir Alec Cooper."

"Put Sir Alec at table H."

"*Bien, monsieur.*" Then to Tony: "This way, if you please, monsieur."

Jules installed Tony at table D, which occupied a small alcove, sweet-smelling with the perfume of imported flowers. Tony smiled his pleasure; if the auspicious beginning were an

omen, the evening should prove delectable. A good band, pleasant surroundings, excellent food, flowers, the one girl in a million for company—what more could a man want?

He looked at his watch. Not many minutes to go before ten-fifteen. He glanced round. Already the club was moderately full, and what few tables still remained unoccupied bore a card with 'Reserved' written boldly across it. Some of the guests he vaguely recognized from having seen their photographs constantly in the press—a famous racing millionaire, an equally famous racing motorist, an ex-Cabinet Minister. He also definitely recognized a stage star, and a film star, and two novelists, one a friend of his father's. He was still scrutinizing the faces—and the dresses—of the people present when he became aware that many faces were suddenly turned towards the main entrance into the restaurant.

He, too, looked that way, and gasped with amazement as he rose quickly to his feet.

Penelope was standing there. A new, a dazzling, and a beautiful Penelope!

CHAPTER THREE

MANY PAIRS OF EYES FOLLOWED PENELOPE'S PROGRESS AS SHE threaded her way through the crowded tables. Some of the eyes were frankly admiring, and perhaps a little regretful—male eyes, these. Others, belonging to women, were frankly appraising. As for Maurice's eyes, they twinkled with a mischievous, knowing wink as if their owner had been quite convinced that Tony's companion would be just such a lovely, attractive person.

Tony, meanwhile, stood gaping at the approaching vision as if she were a complete stranger to him. In effect, she was, for this was the first time he had seen her in an evening gown. During the past twelve months he had met Penelope, on an average, once a week. Sometimes she had come to London. Sometimes he had visited Datchet, where she lived with her Uncle Ralph and Aunt Elizabeth. It had so happened, however, that she had always worn a tweed costume, or fur coat and frock. Hitherto, whatever she had worn had been simple and smart.

Tonight she was a changed person. She consciously radiated charm and vivacity; her appearance was intensely and alluringly feminine. And Tony, being essentially masculine, and being

possessed of a restless vitality, which seemed to have no limitations, thought her more fascinating, more desirable than ever.

"Penelope!"

Behind her smile of welcome appeared an expression of surprise. "What is the matter, Tony?"

He moved her chair from the table so that she could sit down. As she did so he murmured in her ear: "This is the first time I have seen you in evening dress."

She nodded. "I know. I remembered that on my way here. Isn't it funny that we should have known each other for so long, and yet never have had occasion to wear evening clothes?"

"That is no fault of mine," he growled, as he sat down beside her.

"I know it is not, Tony dear. But you know my views. It will be time enough to enjoy the nice things of life when the world has recovered from the effects of war. But your voice just now, it was so—strange. Is anything wrong?"

"Penny darling, tonight you are so—beautiful . . ."

No woman could have remained unaffected by his sincerity. "Sometimes you are a dear, Tony . . ." She recognized the meaning of the expression which sprang into his eyes. She raised a warning finger. "But remember. If you make love to me I shall leave."

"But you are going to marry me one day, Penny."

"One day, but that day may be—oh! years distant."

"Years be——" He checked himself with an effort. "Well, doesn't even that distant prospect give me the right to claim something—even a trifle—on account?" he pleaded. "Just one kiss now and again, just to be sure that you are really living, and not just the figment of a gorgeous dream?"

"No," she retorted adamantly. "Not while there is still work to be done. Once I let you make love to me you would no longer give all your attention to the job on hand." Then she relented, and it became her turn to plead. "Tony dear, I am having such fun. I never believed life could be so thrilling, so wonderful. Don't ask me to give it up too soon?"

"Why should marriage make any difference to our plans? We could still carry on as we are at present."

"No," she asserted with a determined shake of her head. "That is not so, and in your heart you realize that fact just as well as I, Tony. Once we were married you would want to

forbid my taking part in any of the more dangerous jobs, and I should obey you, because when I do marry I shall be a dutiful, obedient wife."

He grinned. "Oh yeah?" The smile vanished from his eyes and his lips. "I should have every reason to forbid you. It isn't right that a woman should risk disgrace, imprisonment, in some instances, perhaps, death. If I had any influence at all I should try to prevent your taking such risks even before marriage."

"I am well aware of that," she admitted coolly. "That is one reason why I will not let you make love to me. You would attempt to force your will upon me even before you had the legal right. You have enjoyed the dangers we have shared during the past twelve months, haven't you?"

"Every minute of them. But I am a man. From the time of Adam men have faced dangers for the sake of thrills and adventure—"

"And now, at last, women have earned the right to share those thrills and adventures. Tony dear, you may be a delightful young man in years, but you are an old grandfather in ideas. Have you already forgotten that women shared in the dangers of the war—and gladly—"

"And bravely," he added quickly.

"Thank you, darling. But we women were influenced by those dangerous years just as much as you men. In fact, more so. War had not directly touched the British women for centuries. When it did, the effect was rather shattering. You men are going to find women much changed from what they were before the war. No, Tony, in our reaction to danger and adventure you and I are a well-matched pair. Don't try to destroy our partnership. It has been so pleasant—"

"Except when you heard Stynkluck's yell when I slammed his fingers in the door."

"Don't, Tony, please." Her cheeks paled; her eyes became anguished. "Sometimes that moment haunts my dreams. But I have no regrets. Almost more than any of our victims he deserved his punishment. You men are mistaken if you think there is any room for pity and forgiveness in our hearts for the foul, beastly wretches who robbed and injured us in our time of trial."

"Then you won't sit back and take a back seat in the more active part of our work?"

"Not yet. I can only be young once. When I marry, perhaps I shall turn over a new leaf. But not before. And particularly where Xavier Wylson is concerned."

"Xavier Wylson? Who and what is he?"

"Who he is, you know. He is Xavier Wylson, and in Xavier's world only Xavier matters. What he is—well, the slimiest, beastliest toad that ever assumed the form of man. Take a look at him for yourself, Tony."

"In here?"

"He is sitting at the second table on the right of the orchestra—not the table near the wall, but the small one, on the edge of the dance-floor."

Tony glanced towards the table Penny was indicating. Three people sat there; two men and a woman. There was nothing uncommon about the woman; she was well and expensively dressed; her coiffeur was immaculate, her face was bold and handsome. Her expression was hard and unsympathetic. Tony considered her a typical night-club *habituée*.

Her companions were less ordinary. On her right sat a man who possessed one of the longest, most gaunt faces Tony had ever seen. His hair was grey and thin, so thin indeed that it barely sufficed to conceal the crown of his head, which looked bald. In contrast to the head, his eyebrows were thick and black, while his eyelashes, even at a distance, looked far too long for a masculine face. His eyes were so dark that they looked almost black. His shapely nose was of pure Grecian type, exceedingly pointed, and, like his face, thin. His mouth was hard. His complexion was startlingly white, except round the eyes and chin, where there were blue shadows which contrasted strangely with his hollow cheeks. He had the appearance of an ascetic who had injured his health by persistent and rigorous fasting.

The second man was of a startlingly contrasting type. He was round and tubby, with a corporation large enough to prevent his sitting close to the table. His hands were prominent, red and powerful. His face matched his hands. His neck was thick and short. He had a mass of hair, but it was a flaming ginger. His lips were thick. His red ears stood out from his head. If ever a man looked coarse and bestial, that man did, and Tony felt ready to believe anything Penelope might say to his detriment.

"I see him, Penny. An unpleasant customer if his appearance is any indication of his character."

"Which man are you looking at?"

"The man on our right—the red-headed tub."

"The other man is Xavier Wylson," Penny pointed out drily.

"The lean-faced, austere johnny who looks as if he hasn't had a square meal for years?"

"Yes."

"But, Penny, he looks more a saint than—than—how did you describe him——"

"I called him the slimiest, beastliest toad that ever assumed the form of man."

"I'll be darned if he looks it," Tony protested. "He doesn't look slimy, he doesn't look beastly, and certainly I would never have thought of describing him as a toad."

"I was describing his nature, not his appearance," she said quietly. "But perhaps I was wrong in calling him a toad. He is more a snake than a toad—a vicious, evil snake."

He grinned. "You are free with your adjectives tonight, my girl. Slimy, beastly, vicious, evil——"

"He is all of those things."

"Then he hides the fact pretty well. If I were asked what he is I should guess—a monk in the wrong clothes, an Oxford don, an archaeologist, or an undertaker."

"He is a writer."

"Never heard the name," Tony answered promptly. "Apparently he doesn't write my type of literature."

"Not all authors write your particular type of reading, darling. Fortunately for the future of literature."

"Time enough to read the serious stuff when I settle down to a domestic life! What does he write?"

"Pamphlets."

"Pamphlets! I shouldn't have thought there was real money to be made in pamphlets."

"Xavier Wylson does not have to make money, Tony. He is already a millionaire."

"Then why does he want to waste time writing tripey pamphlets?"

"Because his soul is rotten to the core. Because he wants to add power to his wealth, and is careless how many lives he wrecks while doing so."

Tony whistled. "I thought we had disposed of all those gentry."

"We may have settled with the foreigners, darling, but not

with their imitators who live in our midst. Xavier Wylson, for instance."

"Who is the beefy gent at the same table? His Chief of Secret Police?"

Penelope's eyes clouded. "Please be serious. Just for once, Tony. You must believe me when I tell you that what we have been doing these past twelve months may prove to be child's play compared with the job of dealing with Wylson as he deserves."

Excitement flared in Tony's eyes. "Now you are talking, Penny. But tell me more of the Wylson johnny. I am beginning to feel deuced curious about him."

"You were asking about the little fat man just now. He is a printer and publisher. He is Xavier Wylson's publisher. His name is Bamburr. Hugo Everard Bamburr. He owns the Hebee Press, Ltd."

Tony made a wry face. "I must be a damned ignorant chap, Penny dear, for none of those names means anything to me."

She smiled at him. "I did not think they would. I very much doubt that they would mean anything to anyone outside political circles or New Scotland Yard. Now I will give you another name which I think you will recognize—Jason."

~~The good humour, vivacity, tolerance, all the emotions which~~ went to make up Tony's customary attractive expression—these disappeared with the mention of that name, for the pseudonym of Jason had been notorious for several years. Appearing at the head of a score of pamphlets, hundreds of pamphlets—few knew the actual number—it was as well known to members of all the armed forces, and the civil defence services, as to the toilers in the mines, the factories, the shipyards, and the fields. The pamphlets were distributed by the thousand; read and re-read; passed from hand to hand, and wherever they went they sowed discontent, industrial strife, trouble.

In the early days of their distribution the attention of the authorities had been quickly drawn to the existence of these pamphlets. There had been many conferences between the Home Secretary, the Director of Public Prosecutions, and the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, but none of these conferences had resulted in action being taken against either the anonymous writer of the articles or the printer, whose imprint appeared on every pamphlet. This inactivity was not on account of any unwillingness of the authorities to proceed against the

pamphleteer. On the contrary, they were eager and anxious to do so, but the writer had been clever. With devilish cunning and ingenuity he had, from first to last, kept within the strict legal limits of the law. The keenest legal brains in the country had been conscripted to read and dissect the pamphlets, in the hope of finding an illegality by which the authorities could launch a counter-attack, but they had failed consistently. The pamphlets were critical of every act of the political party in power, and of their attempts to give the country good government—but not so critical as to be libellous, or to be actionable under Acts passed to protect the public from mischief and nuisance. By inference they were subversive, but not sufficiently so to provide the necessary legal proof. So the publication of the pamphlets had continued, week after week, month after month, year after year, before, during, and after the war, because the very law and order which Jason was working so cunningly to overthrow still functioned to protect the writer from interference.

There were few who did not realize Jason's ultimate aim, and there were many who would cheerfully have taken the risk of hanging for the sake of despatching Jason to that other world where a warm welcome already awaited him. Unfortunately, the identity of Jason was, and remained, a secret which the C.I.D. had not even guessed. Apparently only two people knew Jason's identity: Jason himself and his printer and publisher. And this latter gentleman had successfully resisted all wiles, blandishments, threats, and other attempts to wrest the secret from him.

"Is—Xavier Wylson—Jason . . ." The distorted metallic voice was not Tony's, though it came from his lips. And Penelope's violet eyes flamed, for she knew that she had said enough to set Tony's footsteps along the path which she hoped would put a sudden end to further publications under the pseudonym of Jason—Jason, the legendary figure who sowed the teeth of the dragon of Ares, in order to foment contention, and stir up strife and civil war.

She nodded.

"The swine!" He stared at the austere, saint-like face of the pamphleteer, and was assailed by doubts. Whatever else it might be, the face of Xavier Wylson was not that of an unscrupulous intriguer seeking to reverse the fruits of victory by snatching political power at any cost. "Are you quite sure your source of information is reliable, Penny? I have always

understood that the secret of Jason's identity is more closely guarded than the Bank of England."

"Uncle Ralph said there was not a shadow of doubt about its truth. We checked up on the facts, and you know how thorough he is."

"I do," Tony admitted readily. "If your uncle is satisfied that Wylson is Jason, then I am. I know what his checking up means. But how on earth did he come to hear of the fact in the first place?"

"It is a long story, Tony dear. Too long to tell you in detail now, but it has something to do with the death of the husband of Xavier Wylson's private secretary. Apparently she suspected the truth some time back—she recognized the phrasing of Jason's pamphlets as being characteristic of her employer. One day she found a scrap of half-charred paper which proved her suspicions correct. Apparently the discovery did not offend against her particular brand of ethics, but the secret was too good to keep absolutely to herself. She shared it with her husband, who, on his death-bed, passed it on to Uncle Ralph while Uncle was making out the man's will." She leaned forward. "Shall we deal with him, Tony, as he deserves?"

"Only the devil can do that adequately," Tony muttered harshly. "But I don't see why we should not give him a foretaste of what he has coming to him in due course of time." He paused. "Death is too good for a swine of his calibre."

An expression of fear crossed her face. She laid a hand lightly upon his, which rested upon the table-top. "Tony!" she whispered. "Not—not *that*."

"Not that," he agreed soberly. "My own neck is too precious to risk on a snake. Besides . . ." He grinned. "I said that death was too good for him. The point is, what punishment meets with his particular beastliness? For his own foul purposes he conspires to make fighting men dissatisfied with their officers, urges workpeople to tear down their factories and shops, encourages the unemployed to become thugs. Penny darling, even if I had never enjoyed adventure for its own sake, I should welcome the opportunity of dealing with that devil in saint's clothing."

His manner became business-like. "How are we going to deal with him, Penny? Money? Would it be any use trying to make him disgorge?"

She shook her head. "He has too much. I doubt

whether you could make him disgorge enough to influence his plans."

"His hands?" Tony answered his own question with a shake of his head. "No. He could still dictate his damned stuff to that precious secretary of his. What of his affections? Has he any? I cannot imagine a snake like Jason loving anyone but his own beastly self."

"You are too right, Tony dear. He is a bachelor, without a living relation to care for, or care for him."

"Who is the woman with him?"

"I don't know. Possibly Mrs. Bamburg."

He pursed his lips angrily. "There must be some way of dealing with the swine." He glanced across the restaurant at the gaunt-faced Wylson.

"Tony!"

Immersed in his own thoughts, he did not hear her.

"Tony."

This time he turned. "What is it, Penny?" he asked quickly, for he saw that her manner was uncertain, anxious.

"I haven't told you everything yet."

"Well?"

"Xavier Wylson is rich enough to take—to take—precautions."

"Against what?"

"Any—any harm coming to him from anyone who might wish him ill."

"What kind of precautions?"

"Among others—two bodyguards. There is not one minute of the day or night when two bodyguards are not within call. You would not find it so easy to deal with him as with Stynkluck. Or to set his study on fire as you did Murger's."

A slow smile parted Tony's lips; his brown eyes danced with excitement. "Go on, Penny. Carry on with the good news. You are making the proposition more attractive than ever."

The light in her lovely violet eyes matched his in all save recklessness. She shook her head reprovingly. "Fools rush in, Tony . . . This affair is not going to be as easy as the others."

"Where are his bodyguards at this moment?" he challenged.

"I suspect the two men at the table nearest the door," she answered drily.

He started, and inspected the two men in question. Both were in evening dress, and, at first glance, inconspicuous. A

second glance revealed the breadth of their chests, and a certain massiveness about their build. Moreover, their expressions were more bored than interested, and the sleekness of their appearance did not altogether hide a suggestion of toughness, and a readiness to mix in any mêlée in which they might become involved.

"You may be right, Penny," he admitted. "They might be a couple of travellers from the Dominions, intent on hitting the high spots, but they might quite as easily be a couple of polished bruisers. Do you know where our friend Wylson lives?"

"He has two houses. One near Leatherhead, the other in Hampstead."

"What are his recreations, besides coming to night-clubs and trying to start a revolution?"

Before Penelope could answer there was an interruption. A passing guest slipped on the polished floor. As he felt himself pitching forward he tried to save himself by catching hold of the table at which Penelope and Tony were sitting. The effort was successful, but at Penelope's expense. She sprang to her feet with an exclamation of distress.

CHAPTER FOUR

TONY JUMPED UP HASTILY. "WHAT IS THE MATTER, PENNY?"

She grimaced. "The water has trickled through my skirt, down my stocking, and into my shoe."

Tony was unsympathetic. He chuckled loudly, which earned him a cross look from Penelope. The stranger who had caused the trouble was far more upset.

"Please forgive me. I am terribly sorry, but my foot slipped under me—I think I must have stepped on a pat of butter, or ice cream."

"It isn't very bad," Penelope hastened to assure the embarrassed man. "It was the surprise and the clamminess which made me cry out." She looked into his face, and saw that his lips were tightly pressed, his cheeks pale, his eyes pained.

"You are ill!" she exclaimed. "Quick, Tony, order a brandy."

"No, no," the man interjected quickly. "Please do nothing

of the sort. I do not need brandy. I am not ill. It is just that my ankle is paining me. I am afraid I gave it a twist just now. If I might sit down for a minute or two——"

"Of course."

There was a third chair at the table, so Tony moved it nearer to the stranger, who sat down quickly with a slight gasp. Meanwhile Jules had rushed up, and was busily mopping up the tablecloth with a spare napkin.

"Jules, will you bring this gentleman a brandy, please?"

"Yes, monsieur." Jules hurried off to execute the order.

The stranger muttered a grateful: "Thank you," then added: "My name is Gregory."

"Mine is Verrell, Mr. Gregory, and this is Miss Sladen." Tony glanced at Penny, who had sat down again. "Hadn't you better do something about drying your shoes and stockings, Penny?"

She shook her head. "My stocking is already drying. The shoe I have slipped off. By the time we are ready to leave the heat of this room will have dried it."

"What about our dances?" he asked ruefully.

Her eyes twinkled mischievously. "Surely you do not want me to dance in a wet shoe, Tony dear?" But seeing his obvious disappointment, she relented. "I have pushed it up against the radiator. It won't be many minutes drying."

"I am terribly sorry about this business," Gregory broke in. "If I had slipped even a couple of feet farther on I might have made a grab for the wall instead of the table." His voice became somewhat bitter. "Of course, I would have to create a scene like this on my first visit to this club."

"I shouldn't worry," Tony said lightly. "It was not your fault you stepped on something greasy. If you had not the chances are that, before the evening was out, somebody else would have done so. By which time it might have been wine or coffee instead of water."

Just then Jules delivered the brandy, so Tony pushed it over to Gregory. "Drink that right down. With any luck it may make you think you have two weak legs instead of one."

Gregory grinned. "I have never had the luck to find a drink strong enough to do that in one. Anyway, here's hoping." He swallowed the liquid down. As he replaced the glass on the table his eyes gleamed. "So there is still some real stuff to be found in London." He watched Jules walk towards another table. "Is all Maurice's liquor as good as his brandy?"

one of the brainless kind, and where arts are concerned I haven't even reached first-form standard. All the same, I am passionately devoted to all the arts, so it gives me pleasure just to know I am in the company of artists, or people of superior intelligence. You don't think I am a fool, do you?"

"Why should I?" Tony asked genially. "Penny, here, will tell you that I am pretty much of a brainless fool myself."

Her lips twitched. "I should admit that there are times when you talk most foolishly, my love, but I have known you betray occasional flashes of moderate intelligence."

Gregory smiled uneasily. "I think my ankle is better now, so I will get a waiter to help me out of this place so I can catch a taxi." He signalled Jules, who immediately approached.

"Yes, monsieur?"

"Will you give me an arm to help me out, waiter?"

"But certainly, monsieur." Jules slipped a hand beneath Gregory's shoulder, and helped the guest to his feet. Gregory carefully lowered his foot to the ground and tested his weight upon it. The effort caused his face to twist, but evidently the pain was not too bad, for he held out his hand to Penny.

"Many, many apologies for my clumsiness," he said gravely. "And for having interrupted your pleasant evening. And many thanks for allowing me to rest at your table." He transferred his hand to Verrell. "Thank you, too, Mr. Verrell, for the brandy. I shall read your father's books with more interest than ever."

"Thanks, Mr. Gregory."

"I am afraid I have a preference for being a night-bird in these days—or, rather, nights—so perhaps we shall meet again in one of the clubs when my ankle has fully recovered." Gregory turned and, with the help of Jules, hobbled across the restaurant and out of the door. No sooner had he vanished from sight than Maurice hurried up to Tony and Penny.

"I am desolate, monsieur and mademoiselle, to think of this happening on the occasion of your first visit to this club. I trust no harm was caused by his carelessness."

"None whatever, Monsieur Maurice. I have almost forgotten it has happened."

"Mademoiselle is so—*gentille*—so kind." He turned to Tony. "Of course, monsieur, there will be no charge for the brandy."

"Thanks, Maurice, but I should have had no objection to paying for it. A queer cuss, Gregory, but he amused me."

"What name did you say, monsieur?"

"Gregory. At least, that is the name by which he introduced himself to us."

Maurice's dark, bushy eyebrows twitched. "That is strange."

"What is?"

"That is not his name, monsieur."

"The devil it isn't!" Tony felt rightly annoyed with the man who had just left. "Then what is it?"

"Detective-Sergeant George Grant of the C.I.D., monsieur." Maurice's face creased into a broad smile. "Perhaps Monsieur Verrell has done something criminal for which the police wish to arrest him—no?" Chuckling loudly at his joke, Maurice walked away to another part of the restaurant.

"Tony!"

"I think it is time we danced," Tony muttered hoarsely as the band struck up the opening bars of a slow waltz.

II

For the past few hours Tony had eagerly awaited his first dance with Penelope. He had visualized the moment when she would snuggle into his arms, and fill his nostrils with the subtle perfume which always clung to her. He had dreamed of the perfect harmony with which their feet would move to the rhythm of the music, and of the joy of her intimate nearness.

None of these sensations was his as they stepped on to the small polished floor and joined the throng of dancers already there. He placed his arm round her slim, yielding body without any feeling of exaltation, and automatically stepped forward to the pronounced beat of the drum. Without a word to each other, they circled the floor, stiffly and unenthusiastically. Not until they had moved round nearly four times did Penelope speak—or, rather, whisper.

"Tony?"

"Yes?"

"Why did the detective call himself Gregory?"

"Perhaps he is a snob, and did not want anyone here to know he was a plain-clothes policeman," Tony suggested unconvincingly.

"Why did he question you about your interest in night-clubs?"

"Heaven alone knows!"

"Why did he ask so many questions about your father's knowledge of crime?"

"I wish I could tell you."

"And why did he mention Kurt Stynkluck's name?"

"Stynkluck was one of several he mentioned."

"He might have mentioned several members of the Fifty-Two who are more famous than Stynkluck." Although this last remark was rather a statement than a question, Penelope paused as though waiting for Tony to speak. When he did not, the hand which clasped his tightened, and she continued: "Tony, that man knows something. He suspects you."

Still Tony said nothing.

"Why don't you say something, Tony?"

"I am not quite sure that I agree with your theory, Penny."

"His identity, his slip, and the subsequent conversation could not have been a coincidence."

"Did you glance at his ankle as he left our table?"

"No."

"I did. It had swollen badly. Somehow I do not see a man deliberately twisting his ankle merely as an excuse for speaking to someone."

"Oh!" They danced a complete circuit before she spoke again. "Then what do you make of all the questions that detective asked you?"

"I will tell you what I think." Tony spoke in a slow, measured voice which suggested that he was deep in thought even as he spoke. "I think that one of our—er—victims must have said enough to make Scotland Yard suspicious of certain activities upon which they are not likely to look with complacency. Accordingly, this man Detective-Sergeant Grant was assigned to the case. For some unknown reason he has connected up our activities with night-clubs——"

"Why should he?" she interrupted.

"Because it happens that most of the men who have illegally profited from the war are now in the process of spending their profits. The frequenting of night-clubs appeals to that type of scoundrel. Stynkluck, for instance. And Murger. And Johnstone. And Trysscke. And now Xavier Wylson. Somebody has been clever in putting two and two together, but just a little too clever in believing that night-clubs are the spy-holes, as it were, of our information.

"It may be, Penny, that this Grant fellow has been haunting

swine who filled their pockets during the war spend their rotten gains, and other swine put their own dirty schemes into operation at the expense of their fellow human beings? I thought your heart was just as much in this business as mine."

"So it is," she informed him evenly. "I have enjoyed every dangerous moment we have spent, Tony darling, not only for the thrill of facing risks and devising ideas to escape their consequences, but also because I enjoy punishing the nasty, beastly parasites who battered on the public during the years of trouble. But, don't you see, Tony, if we should carry on we would have to face infinitely worse risks than those of the past year, because we should be against not only the men themselves, but also the police: not against one man at one time, but against hundreds of men, uniformed and plain-clothes; against an efficient, full-time organization which few people have successfully defied for long."

He knew her too well to believe for one moment that her use of the plural 'we' was sincere. What she really meant was 'you'; and his heart warmed happily in the knowledge that she really cared for him as much as he hoped, yet scarcely dared to believe. Penny was not a girl to change her ideas because of added risks. Not she!—and he would not insult her by suggesting that she should resign from the partnership while he carried on. But, if she was not one to hesitate in facing added risks, nor was he! The son of Blackshirt afraid of the police! He laughed aloud at the mere thought.

"Why are you laughing?"

"With happiness, Penny dear."

"I see no reason for happiness in what has happened."

"But I do. In the first place, I have just learned how much you really care about my safety——"

She was unable to meet his mischievously triumphant eyes. She lowered her head so that she gazed over his shoulder instead of into his face. "I am not anxious to see any of my friends sent to prison," she informed him in a voice somewhat less cool than usual. "And your other reasons—if any?"

"There is only one other. The more risks, the more fun to be had in meeting them."

"Some risks, perhaps, Tony," she agreed. Her hand tightened. "But not the risk of—of imprisonment. Think of the disgrace of being placed in the dock, of being charged with a crime, of being sentenced, and of knowing that none of your old

friends would ever want to see or to speak to you again. And think of being locked up in a cell, day after day, month after month, perhaps year after year. Think of having to spend years in the sole company of thieves, rogues, and men guilty of beastly crimes. . . ."

Tony remained silent. The laughter vanished from his eyes, his expression became set in sombre lines. The picture Penelope had painted was an unpleasant one, and so true. In the past the risk of imprisonment and disgrace had been infinitely less than the danger of physical hurt, because nearly all his victims had had every reason for resisting police interference even at the expense of their own discomfort. But if it were a fact that Scotland Yard had become interested in his activities, the powers-that-be were not likely to heed the reticence of the victims to prosecute, but would act upon their own responsibility in hounding down the man who was taking the law into his own hands. It would make no difference to the police that their personal sympathies were all for the man they were trying to arrest—the only fact which would interest them was that he was breaking the law, and that it was their duty to try to arrest and charge him with the offence.

There was this, too, to consider. In the past the periods of risk to himself had been short, and due to the reluctance of the victims to call in the police, there had been no risk at all during the weeks between the various 'incidents'. But if he were to continue his idealistic, if joyous, campaign, he would no longer be free from risk. He would have to be on his guard every second of every minute of every hour of the day, and of every day of the three hundred and sixty-five days of the year. There might never be a moment when the police would not be looking for him, searching for the clue which would lead them to him, or perhaps for the evidence to arrest him. He would become no better than a haunted beast.

The dance finished. The dancers on the floor clapped for an encore, Tony among them, for he was prompted by the desire for more time to reflect upon what his course of action should be. The band smiled cheerfully, and struck up a new tune.

Tony drew Penelope into his arms again, and began to dance. His movements were so stiff and automatic that no partner could have believed that he was genuinely enjoying the dance. Penelope was quite aware that his heart was not in tune with his feet, but she remained silent, because she divined his mental

struggle. Meanwhile, he was asking himself what good reason could there be for his taking the risk of arrest, and of living the life of a wanted man. There was obviously no good reason. Nobody had appointed him keeper of public morality. As long as people kept within the law was there any valid excuse for their being punished? If they stepped beyond the limits of the law, then it was the duty of the police to arrest and charge them, and the duty of the law officers to try and punish them.

This mood quickly passed, as it was bound to; not for nothing was he the son of Blackshirt. He thought of the many years during which Blackshirt had been wanted by the police. As his son well knew, Blackshirt was no worse off for that experience. Rather the contrary: there were few men with a better physique than Richard Verrell's, or a keener intellect. Moreover, Tony knew, from the stories he had once heard from the lips of old Marshall, that Blackshirt had lived those years with a zest and enjoyment incomprehensible to the ordinary man. Not so incomprehensible to the son of Blackshirt, though, for had not he, Tony, enjoyed every minute of the past twelve months, during which time he had taken one risk after another just for the sake of punishing a number of mean-souled profiteers?

Tony's movements became suddenly vivacious; he moved and swayed happily, consciously, to the rhythm of the dance. No word was uttered, but Penelope knew intuitively that her plea had failed; and that, whatever the risk, Tony intended to pursue the gay, reckless course on which she had, unwittingly perhaps, set his feet.

She was unnaturally, but unmistakably, glad.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRECISELY AT NINE-THIRTY THE FOLLOWING MORNING TONY called at the Rex Hotel. He found Penelope dressed, and waiting for him.

"Hullo!" he greeted cheerfully, and then asked—although the answer was obvious—"Are you all ready?"

"Absolutely. Bill paid, and my luggage down." She pointed to a solitary suit-case which stood near the revolving door.

"Let's get going while the sun remains out." He walked across to the suit-case, picked it up and carried it out, followed by Penelope, who called back a good-bye to the reception clerk. A few minutes later they were in Oxford Street, heading westwards.

"How do you feel after your night out?" he asked presently.

"Heavenly!" she replied happily. "It seems ages since I last danced."

"That is your fault, not mine," he pointed out.

"So you said last night, my pet, in almost those same words, and I told you why. But the dance was all the nicer for having been the first for so long. Oh, Tony! I adore dancing."

He was not slow to take advantage of her words and her mood. "Then come dancing with me, Penny darling," he urged swiftly. "Let me give you a heavenly night—well—so often——"

Her lips twitched, but she kept her voice under control. "How often?" she questioned.

"Say twice a week," he suggested enthusiastically. "Or even once." Her silence made him falter. "Well, at least every fortnight." Still she remained silent. "Then once a month?" he finished tamely.

She laughed joyfully. "Tony, sometimes you are such a funny old dear that you make me feel almost maternal towards you. But I daren't trust you——"

The car rocked as he stamped on the foot-brake—fortunately the traffic light ahead changed from green to orange at the same moment, which gave the driver behind no excuse to hurl invective at Tony for his abrupt stop.

"What do you mean—you cannot trust me?" he demanded angrily.

"Not what you have in mind, silly," she chided. "I was thinking of the ell you would demand if I gave you an inch."

"I shouldn't demand an ell."

"Yes, you would, my sweet pet. Being a man, you would be unable to help yourself. If I should dare to promise you an occasional dance, within a few weeks you would be trying to persuade me to make it once a month, then once a fortnight, then once a week, then twice a week——"

"I should not," he interrupted vigorously. "Try me out, and I shall disprove your unjust accusations."

"I refuse to make rash promises." With dreamy eyes she

watched some people strolling along the pavement, 'window-shopping'. Her lips parted in a contented smile. "But perhaps—occasionally . . ." she murmured.

"When?" he demanded enthusiastically.

The smile vanished; she became business-like again. "Not until we have dealt with Xavier Wylson," she told him evenly.

"Then the sooner we deal with that louse the better I shall be pleased. Have you learned much about him, Penny?"

"Practically nothing. Uncle only told me about him and his secret activities four days ago. I came up to see you as soon as I could."

"How did you come to recognize him?"

"He and that man Bamburgh were pointed out to me about two months ago, at the Windsor film studios."

"What were they doing there?"

"Between them they own a controlling interest in Progress Films. Did you see *The Rich Man Died*?"

Tony had seen the film Penny mentioned. A few months ago it had created a mild sensation, on account of its subtle propaganda against members of the House of Lords. During the first weeks of its general release the public had not suspected the propaganda, because of its clever direction, sincere acting, and an ingenious story. Then a member of the Upper House, who had been intelligent enough to comprehend the inference behind the story, was foolish enough to write a letter of complaint to the Press. Directly the inference was publicized, everyone else, naturally, saw the film through the same pair of spectacles, and a vast number of disinterested people went specially to the cinemas in order to stage noisy demonstrations against the principal character in the film, a wealthy peer who dies in the throes of remorse, following a misused life spent in exercising his power (alleged to be his because of an inherited title) to the detriment of plain John Smith.

"I saw the film," Tony told his companion. "A few more like it and the Government will have to face up to trouble not unlike that which, a few years after the last war, threatened the Government of that time. Penny, I'll do something to hurt that swine Wylson if it's the last thing I do. By the way, how did you learn about those two thugs who act as his bodyguard?"

"They were at the studio with him. Mr. Moberly, the studio manager, told me about them. At the time I thought it silly for a man like Wylson to have bodyguards."

"Did Moberly know the reason for the bodyguards?"

"I don't think so, Tony. He said it was just Wylson's swank, to make people think him a more important man than—in Moberly's opinion—he is. I do not know why, but Moberly and I talked of Wylson for at least five minutes. I think I was impressed, as you were last night, by Wylson's face, and therefore vaguely interested in him. It was then that I learned of the two houses; also, that he rarely stays at his Hampstead house."

"Anything else, Penny?"

"I am afraid not."

Tony asked no more questions for the time being. The silence which followed persisted; presently Penelope looked away from the crowded pavements, and glanced curiously at her companion. She saw that his face had lost something of its habitual animation. His profile looked almost grim: his lips were pressed firmly together, his eyes stared ahead in a steady, unswerving gaze.

This business-like Tony, this other Tony, whose existence was known only to a mere handful of people; this Tony was no stranger to Penelope. She had met him probably four times in all during the months of their friendship; but he was so different from the normal Tony that she always experienced a mild surprise that one body could house two such apparently different people. The normal Tony was gay-hearted, boyish; his mobile lips and his reckless eyes alike housed a quirk which betrayed itself at the slightest provocation. A pleasant, likeable fellow from every point of view, but not one to make the casual observer aware that, beneath the surface, was a determined, vigorous character which could be extraordinarily ruthless if the occasion demanded.

Though Penelope seldom met the other Tony, whenever she did so the encounter gave her an extraordinary sensation of confidence and satisfaction. She had no need to ask herself why he had become one of Britain's most successful night fighters: she could close her eyes and picture him at the controls of a Defiant; she could see those firm lips of his pressed together in grim resolution, his eyes flaming with the desire to get at close grips with an enemy who was dropping high explosives upon a helpless population below. Yes, indeed, this other Tony was a man whom any man—or woman—should gladly welcome as a friend, but fear and dread as an enemy. As for herself, she dared not let him realize just how glad she was to number him among her

friends, for if he did, if once he divined the full extent of her feeling for him—well, as likely as not he would batter down her opposition to an early marriage, and so bring to an end the adventure and excitement which she was extremely anxious should not cease—yet.

Tony loved adventure more genuinely than any other man she knew; he was not truly content with life unless he were engaged in some enterprise which had not only the risk of danger attached to it (the more danger the more he was content) but, which also called for considerable intelligence and perspicacity.

Unfortunately, Penelope shared similar desires and emotions. She knew herself to be, in a sense, his feminine counterpart. The war had made her alive to this. One night a camp to which she had been posted had been bombed. As the first bomb whistled down towards her she experienced a strange stirring within her breast which she failed, at first, to identify. The fluttering round her heart, which had begun with the warning, ceased abruptly; her confused thoughts focused into ice-cold clarity, while her blood warmed to the excitement of danger. Some moments later she knew that she was not afraid; on the contrary, she thrilled to the knowledge that she was sharing in the danger of millions of Britons who were fighting for the safety and liberty of their womenfolk and their countries.

Naturally, she breathed a sigh of relief when the raid came to an end; naturally, she was glad that she was not one of the twenty-three casualties; naturally, every subsequent warning still caused her heart to pitter-patter. But the impression made upon her at that moment of realizing that she was not afraid, and that she was warm with excitement, remained unforgettable. In that moment was born her determination to extract more stimulus from life than ordinarily falls to the lot of the average woman.

Unaware that Penelope's eyes contained an unwitting message which would have given him every encouragement to take her in his arms at the first opportunity, Tony pondered on the problem of dealing with Xavier Wylson. What he had learned, so far, of the millionaire pamphleteer was neither illuminating nor encouraging. To begin with, Wylson had not only to be punished for past offences, but to be prevented, if possible, from continuing his underhand, subversive propaganda. God knows! Tony thought, the existing Government was scarcely a model one (what Government ever is?), but it was, at

least, doing its best to bring into effect some of the ideals for which the democratic countries had fought and bled ; whatever its failings, venality was not among them. It was certain, however, that any Government led by Wylson would not be equally above suspicion. Whatever Wylson's plans might be, it was certain that they were concerned with his own aggrandizement.

There appeared to be no subtle way of hurting Wylson. With neither wife nor children, one could not play upon his affections, as in the case of Sir William Rux, who valued his daughter's life more than the money he had amassed from manipulating the assets of the Inter-Continental Holdings Trust. He was not interested, apparently, in any of the arts, either in an active or passive role ; it was not possible, therefore, to deal with him by means similar to those used in the case of Stynkluck. Nor was he a collector of precious or rare articles, so one could not hurt him, as Murger had been hurt, by destroying some, and threatening to destroy other treasured possessions.

At last, reflecting that it was too early to wrestle seriously with the problem of how to deal with Wylson, Tony relaxed and turned to Penelope. "Are you quite sure you must return to Windsor tonight ?" he enquired wistfully.

"I am quite sure," she answered firmly.

Tony sighed, and began speaking of other matters.

II

Some time later Tony halted the car along a short stretch of country road about a mile south of Leatherhead.

"This looks like the road that postman described, Penny—I suppose those three trees over there are ash, aren't they ? At any rate, they form a rough triangle, and are opposite a duck-pond, of sorts, which is what the old chap said. But I am darned if I see any signs of a house."

"I am sure this must be the place." She peered ahead at a line of trees which appeared to form the fringe of a fair-sized wood. "Can I see railings there, underneath the branches of those trees farther along the road ?"

Tony looked at the trees, and beneath the outspread boughs was able to distinguish something which certainly resembled iron railings.

"I think you are right, Penny, and as woods are not usually railed in unless there is a house somewhere among them, no doubt there is a house there, too. If so——"

"It is probably *Three Ways*."

Tony nodded. "I am darned if I can see any signs of the building from here. Our pal Xavier must be fond of trees, to have them so thick about him."

"Or privacy," Penelope suggested. "Drive on past the woods, Tony. There must be an entrance farther along, through which we might be able to see more."

Tony put the engine into gear and drove slowly forward. They were soon level with the edge of the wood, and were able to confirm that they really had seen railings. They stretched away out of sight, in one direction parallel with the winding road, and in the other at right angles to it. The railings looked old, and had been erected among the trees rather than beyond them, possibly to make them less obvious, and so less inharmonious with their surroundings.

Some four hundred yards farther along the road they drew level with an entrance: a pair of handsome, wrought-iron gates, some ten feet in height. Their hope of catching a glimpse of the house from the entrance was, however, frustrated, for though the gates opened on to a drive which very obviously led to a building of more importance than, for instance, a farm outbuilding, the drive curved off in both directions in a wide, sweeping semicircle, and both arms were lost from sight behind thick plantations of high-growing evergreens, which also hid the house. However, their journey was not entirely wasted, for a neat board attached to the right-hand gate bore the words *Three Ways*.

Tony stopped the car opposite the gates, and made a show of lighting cigarettes for Penelope and himself—although there was nobody in sight to observe them, he thought it not impossible for the shadows under the trees, or the plantation of evergreens, to conceal a pair of curious eyes.

"The view from here doesn't help much," Tony grumbled in a low voice, as he held a flaming match to Penelope's cigarette. "Whoever built *Three Ways* evidently didn't mean to be over-looked by the proletariat. And why the deuce was it called *Three Ways*, anyway? I cannot see a sign of another road anywhere." He stared at the trees with annoyance. "I wonder how far off the house is, and what it looks like."

"Drive up and see," Penelope suggested blithely.

His eyes gleamed with mischief. "By the Lord Harry! That's an idea, Penny. We'll do just that."

"Tony, don't be ridiculous. You know I was only joking."

"Maybe, but I am not. We cannot be arrested, can we, for just driving up to the house and having a look at it?"

"Somebody must be about."

"What of that?"

"I should think it very likely that you might be asked what you were doing, making a tour of private property."

"If I cannot think of a good answer to that question, I am not the son of my father."

"Sometimes I think you are not, Tony. Your father's nature is so placid and restful, so different from yours, that it is difficult to realize that you are related."

Tony chuckled. Blackshirt, placid and restful! Blackshirt, of all people! What a joke! But a joke not to be shared, not even with Penelope, to whom he was quite ready to entrust his own life.

"Look at the A.A. map, Penny, and tell me the name of the next town or village."

"I can tell you without looking at the map. Mickleham."

"Fine. Then you have an appointment with Doctor Luke of Mickleham."

"Tony! What do you mean?"

He did not reply to the question, for he was already jumping down from the car and running towards the gates. Half-way there he saw a chain and padlock hanging from the two gates, and the thought occurred to him that he might find it necessary to ring the massive bell which was suspended from an iron hook on the inside of the right-hand iron gatepost. Upon reaching the gate he saw that the chain hung, not round both gates as he had for a moment believed, but only round the left-hand one; when he turned the iron handle and pushed, the right-hand gate swung open.

When both gates were wide open he hurried back to the car, jumped into the driving-seat, and turned the car sharply to the left, on to that part of the drive which formed a junction with the road. A moment later they had passed the gates, and were progressing along the curving drive.

"What madness are you up to, Tony?" Penelope demanded.

"If I am to be your accomplice, for heaven's sake tell me my cues, and give me some idea of what my role is to be."

"You don't have to worry, Penny darling. Just leave everything to me. Doctor Luke is a famous heart specialist, and you have an appointment with him for your heart to be examined."

She giggled. "If it's heart trouble you are the more likely patient, Tony. My heart is perfectly sound."

"Probably that is what is wrong with it," he growled.

The conversation stopped at that point, for the car emerged from among the trees into a clearing of some twenty acres or more, in the midst of which stood the house, surrounded by lawns and gardens. The drive continued across this space, which gave Tony and Penelope an opportunity of a quick glance at *Three Ways*. It was no more than that; they had scarcely time to do more than appreciate its size and its squareness before it was time to pull up in front of a small portico, which protected the main entrance.

Before Tony could leave the car the door of the house opened, and a man crossed the paved portico and advanced down the five steps to the drive. He was of medium size, with a ruddy face and close-cropped grey hair. He was dressed in the regulation black suit of an upper servant. As he approached the car he placed a hand upon the chromium-plated handle, as though to convey a subtle warning that the door was not to be opened.

"Yes, sir?" he questioned, in a voice which scarcely concealed a note of suspicion behind its formal politeness.

"Miss James has come for her appointment," Tony replied, making a move as though to open the door.

The man did not take his hand away from the handle. "An appointment, sir? I was not told of any appointment with a Miss James, or with any other person. Besides, the master is not here. He is in London."

"In London! But the place of appointment was here, at——" Tony glanced at his watch—"at eleven forty-five; which makes us three minutes early. Doctor Luke asked us particularly not to be late."

"Doctor Luke, sir?"

"Yes. Do you mean to say he is not here?"

"I think you must have made a mistake. I have never heard of a Doctor Luke."

"Never heard of him! But I understood that he lives here. This is *Three Ways*, isn't it?"

"This is *Three Ways*, sir, but no Doctor Luke lives here."

"I cannot understand what on earth has happened. The address was *Three Ways*, Mickleham, wasn't it, Pe—Phyllis?"

"Yes, Edward."

"*Three Ways*, Mickleham! But the postal address of this house is Leatherhead."

"Well, I am hanged!" Tony laughed loudly. "Then it's our mistake. We thought this was the place. It's funny, there being two houses of the same name in this part of the country."

"Very funny, sir. Although I have lived here fifteen years it is the first time I have ever heard of the other *Three Ways*. Or of Doctor Luke. You are still a mile or more from your destination."

The hint was obvious. Tony nodded his head curtly. "Sorry and all that," he said shortly. As the man stepped back from the car Tony pressed the accelerator. The car moved forward along the curving drive, and so back towards the bordering trees. As he drove Tony glanced frequently at the driving-mirror. During the whole of the time the house remained in view, so did the man with whom they had spoken. He remained where they had left him, staring at the rear of the disappearing car.

Tony realized that his mischievous impulse had been a bad move on his part.

CHAPTER SIX

TONY'S DOUBTS ABOUT THE WISDOM OF HIS IMPULSIVE VISIT TO *Three Ways* were evidently shared by Penelope. As he turned off the drive on to the road she said: "I do not think we have been very clever, Tony."

His heart warmed for her generosity in using the plural. "You had nothing to do with it, Penny; the crack-brained idea was entirely mine. But we have learned whereabouts the house is situated, and gained a rough idea of what it is like, so why do you think I have not been too clever?"

"That man did not believe a word of your story."

He grinned cheerfully. "Certainly he didn't seem to have been as impressed as he should have been."

"He will report the matter to Xavier Wylson at the first opportunity."

"Do you think so? He might have forgotten by the time he sees Wylson again."

"I am sure he will not forget. He does not look the type of man to forget. Besides, his eyes were hard and suspicious even before he spoke to you."

"Will it make any difference, Penny, whether or no our Xavier hears of the visit?"

"It will put him on his guard."

"Against what?" he asked shrewdly.

The question was one which she could not answer.

"Besides," Tony continued presently, "as he has no reason to suspect otherwise, we might be merely a couple of cheeky people curious to see what the house was like."

"Why should we be curious?"

"Why not? 'Tain't natural for an ordinary man to want to hide himself quite so completely from the passing world, while it is natural for anyone to want to know why. Haven't you ever wanted to climb a wall to see what was on the other side, or tried to find out why a certain cupboard was locked? There are more Bluebeard's wives knocking about than you imagine."

"You may be right," she agreed dubiously.

"Anyway, we have had our look-see at the house, which is what we wanted."

She nodded. "And now, Tony?"

"Now for Windsor," he muttered disconsolately.

II

Later on in the day Tony safely delivered Penelope at her uncle's house, which was situated not far from Old Windsor. Afterwards he returned to town, had a meal, changed, and went on to La Belle Lorraine. Maurice recognized him immediately, and smiled expansively.

"Ah! I am glad to see monsieur back again tonight. A table for two, monsieur? The same as last night—no?"

"No, Maurice."

"No!" Maurice was shocked. "But there is not a more pleasant table in the club," he pointed out reproachfully.

"I know there isn't, but, you see, tonight I am alone."

"Alone!" The Frenchman tried, not very successfully, to conceal his disappointment—in spite of possessing a hard head for business, he also owned a soft heart, and had taken a liking to the two people who had occupied his favourite table the previous night. His other, sentimental self had convinced him that he had witnessed the blossoming of a genuine romance; but now, it seemed, the new member of his night-club was no different from all the other playboys who spent their money at La Belle Lorraine, and whose affections were apparently as ephemeral as the popular dance hits to which they stepped out with such carefree enthusiasm.

"I will find you a table for one, monsieur," he went on, formally, "but it will not be so well-placed, you understand?"

Tony sensed something of the Frenchman's feelings. "Miss Sladen lives in the country," he explained unnecessarily. "She can only come to town occasionally. I tried to persuade her to stay longer, and come with me tonight, but she was unable to do so."

The information pleased Maurice. "*Je comprends, je comprends*," he acknowledged quickly. "You shall have that small table over there." He indicated a small table unobtrusively tucked away in a corner not far from the band. "But monsieur would like to dance, notwithstanding?"

"You bet," Tony agreed promptly. "But with whom?"

"But with one of our dance hostesses. They are nice young ladies, monsieur, and for you I should recommend Daphne—I think Mademoiselle Sladen would not object to your dancing with her, you understand?"

Tony did understand. He reflected quickly. His chief object in returning to the club was the hope that Wylson might do so too, but he had also had in mind the possibility of making a few discreet enquiries at the same time. By dancing with the Daphne girl he might be able to do just that, without causing suspicion.

"Good idea, Maurice—and many thanks for the suggestion."

"I am happy to be of service, monsieur. I shall send Daphne to you."

Tony sat down at the table Maurice had selected for him and glanced round. The night-club was rapidly filling up, but there was no sign of Wylson. He was disappointed, but noticing that the table which Wylson and Bamburrg had occupied the previous night remained empty, he thought it possible that it was being reserved for the millionaire.

Presently a slim young thing approached his table. She was dressed in a shimmering Nile-green dress, and had a mass of startlingly blonde hair, dressed in the latest mode, and lacquered finger-nails of brilliant scarlet, to match her lips.

"Mr. Verrell?" He nodded and rose. "I am Daphne. Monsieur Maurice sent me."

"Fine." He smiled, and Daphne decided that she was going to enjoy this evening more than most. "Will you sit down, Miss——"

"I have told you, I am Daphne. We dance hostesses are always called by our Christian names. But thank you for the compliment," she added as she sat down.

"Compliment?"

She grimaced. "Some of the men we have to dance with would want to call us by our Christian names even if they knew our surnames."

"I see what you mean." He smiled again. "Tell me, is your name really Daphne?"

She giggled. "Promise you won't repeat what I tell you?" He nodded.

"My real name is—Jane."

"Jane!" He echoed her laughter. "Ye gods! Jane!" Presently he became serious again. "But Jane is a nice name; honest and trustworthy."

"That is the trouble, Mr. Verrell. It is too honest and trustworthy for——" She paused to glance around—"for these surroundings. Jane can milk a cow, or hoe a row of turnips, but can you imagine that man over there, or that one over there, wanting to dance with her for the rest of the evening? But Alexandrina, Chloe, Marianne, Georgina—well . . ." She shrugged her dainty, white-fleshed shoulders.

"I fear me that you are a cynical little person at heart, Daphne."

"Of course. Everybody is after a spell of city night-life. Shall we dance? I love this tune. It reminds me of——" She stopped abruptly. "Well, never mind," she concluded.

As he had anticipated, Tony found Daphne a lovely little dancer; as light as thistledown, and quickly receptive to his lead. Nevertheless, he did not really enjoy the dance; it was too impersonal, and lacked the intimacy and friendliness of a dance with a partner one knew and liked. As for comparing it with any of the dances he had had with Penelope . . .

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He was glad when the last encore was over, so that he could take her back to the table.

For the next hour Daphne and he sometimes talked, sometimes danced. Meanwhile, the night-club became so crowded that late-comers had to be content with perching themselves at a small bar which occupied the length of one wall. Wylson had not yet made an appearance, but the table at which he had sat the previous night still remained vacant, a source of annoyance to some late arrivals.

Presently Tony discreetly mentioned this table to the dance hostess.

"Why doesn't Maurice fill up the vacant table over there by the orchestra?"

"That table! Probably because Xavier Wylson is in town."

"Who is he?"

"Just a millionaire nobody—if a millionaire can be a nobody," she giggled. "He stays in London for three or four days every month. Whenever he does so that table is reserved for him every one of the three or four nights, whether he chooses to occupy it or not."

"Does he come often when he is in town?"

"Mostly."

There was a curious note of antipathy in Daphne's voice which suggested that she did not like the millionaire.

"He does not sound a favourite of yours," Tony remarked slyly.

"He is not. Nor of any of us girls."

"Why not? Is he—well, you know——"

"No. As a matter of fact, he is a cold fish; though we have more than our fill of over-spiced trout, it does not make us appreciate cold cod."

Tony was still chuckling at her crudely-worded simile when she added unexpectedly: "Fortunately, he usually brings his own companion with him. Oh boy! is *she* a peach?"

Tony's smile vanished abruptly. Daphne's remark startled him. From what little he knew, and from what he had seen, he had concluded that Wylson was not interested in women. It seemed that he was wrong; if the millionaire was frequently accompanied by someone whom Daphne described as a peach, it must mean that he was interested in at least one woman. If so, she might be Wylson's Achilles' heel; the chink in his armour through which it might be possible to stab the pamphleteer.

"Is she his wife?"

Daphne giggled. "Not judging by the way he looks at her. I haven't ever seen a husband look at his wife like he looks at Drusilla."

"Is that her name?"

"No, that is what us girls call her, when we talk about her. Ethel—Marcia to the men here—saw in a dictionary one day that Drusilla means: With dewy eyes. And are her eyes dewy when she gazes at that codfish! Heaven alone knows what she sees in him. I know he has a face like a saint, but for all that he makes me shiver when I look into his eyes."

"So they both look at each other with dewy eyes, as it were?"

She nodded. "Yes. Seeing them together makes me think of Love's Young Dream, except that he isn't so young as all that."

"Is she?"

"About twenty-four, I should say."

"What is her real name—Lizzie or Emma? Smith or Jones?"

"Stop teasing, Mr. Verrell. Do you know, we don't know her name, Christian or surname? And there is not much that happens in this place that we don't get to hear about, sooner or later."

Tony's interest sharpened. "Then why haven't you learned her name?"

Daphne pursed her pretty weak lips. "Because, in my opinion, Xavier Wylson doesn't mean us to. There is some mystery about her which they don't want to become public. Perhaps she is somebody's wife. Do you know, one night a photographer came here from one of those society magazines and asked to take pictures of the guests. Maurice told the man he might go ahead, as long as he received permission to do so from any of the guests whom he proposed photographing. At the same time he gave the photographer a word of warning."

"Well?"

"He told the man to keep clear of Wylson's table. But the fool wasn't content to do that—the photographer, I mean. Perhaps he suspected a mystery about Wylson or Drusilla. Having taken about eight exposures, he was on his way out, when he turned round suddenly, took one more of Wylson's girl, and tried to leave swiftly."

"What happened then?"

"Wherever Wylson goes he is accompanied by two husky

bodyguards. Heaven knows why. The photographer didn't know that. That is, not until he had photographed Drusilla. He knew then quickly enough. One of the bodyguards barred the photographer's way out of the place, while the other smashed the camera and the plates to bits." She laughed. "My, there was a rumpus! The photographer threatened trouble. In the end Wyllson paid out a cheque to settle the matter peacefully, and the photographer went away quite happily. But he didn't have his photograph of Drusilla."

"Does Maurice know the identity of Drusilla?"

"Between ourselves, I don't think he does, and is just as curious as the rest of us as to who she is." Daphne laughed suddenly, and added: "Speak of the devil! Look who has just come in."

Tony glanced across the ballroom floor, empty, for the moment, of dancers. Wyllson had just entered, accompanied by his two bodyguards and a ravishingly pretty girl, who, Tony had no doubt, was 'Drusilla'.

III

'Speak of the devil,' Daphne had said, but Tony thought she resembled an angel more than a devil. She really was ravishingly pretty. At the same time, her prettiness was not of the type he had expected from his conversation with the dance hostess. He had anticipated seeing someone of the exotic type, blond or auburn, dressed in the ultra-latest fashions, meticulously coiffured, perhaps bejewelled.

Some of those descriptions applied to Drusilla, but not all. She was neither blond nor auburn; her hair was, indeed, nearly black. Her coiffure was meticulous, but not artificial. She wore jewellery, but it consisted only of a string of flawless, perfectly matched pearls. Her pink cheeks and her slightly olive skin glowed with natural health. Her clothes were obviously expensive, and in excellent taste.

The longer he studied her the more Tony was convinced of three things. The first: that she was no town-dweller, but a girl who spent the greater part of her time in the country. The second: that Daphne had been right in describing her as a peach—but the genuine, English peach with its soft, healthy tint and its fragile bloom. The third: that Drusilla was a member of a wealthy and cultured family.

Wylson and his companion sat down at the reserved table, while Maurice hurried towards them, smiling and bowing. Wylson nodded curtly; Drusilla smiled—and despite the feeling that he ought to feel prejudiced against her because she was Wylson's companion, Tony liked her smile for its sincerity. After a few moments' conversation Wylson gave his orders; to Maurice himself, Tony noticed, and not to one of the waiters. Afterwards Maurice hurried off to see that the millionaire's wishes were carried out, and Wylson and Drusilla rose to dance to the waltz which the band struck up at that moment.

"Shall we dance?" Tony suggested to Daphne.

"I should love to," she replied automatically, but there was an amused twinkle in her eyes.

While Tony guided his partner round the small floor—fortunately less crowded for the moment—he surreptitiously watched Wylson and his partner. Neither was particularly adept, Tony quickly realized, but he was less interested in their steps than in their faces. He was immensely interested in Drusilla; he could not rid himself of the feeling that she was out of place in the hot, smoky atmosphere of a night-club, particularly as Wylson's partner. It was difficult to assess the millionaire's age, but he was sure it was very nearly double that of Drusilla's. He felt angry to think of her caring for a man old enough to be her father, yet she seemed happy enough. Whenever Wylson spoke to her she had a trick of bending her head back so that she could gaze into his face; every time she did so her eyes glowed with such adoration that Tony could thoroughly understand why the dance hostesses of La Belle Lorraine had nicknamed her the girl with dewy eyes.

More and more he wondered who she might be; and more and more he convinced himself that she was indeed the Achilles' heel he had hoped to find. Her eyes were so frank, so honest, he was sure she had no suspicion of Wylson's true character. If once she were to learn what sort of a man Wylson was, surely that would be an end to the romance between them. Just as surely, Tony assured himself, that would be a fitting punishment for Wylson's crimes. For if Drusilla adored him, he adored her no less. The way he held her, the way he looked at her, the way he spoke to her bore evidence that Drusilla meant almost as much to him as life itself. Almost as much as the power for which he conspired so cunningly.

Tony was grateful for the impulse which had prompted him

to return to the night-club. The visit had not been wasted. He had gained a valuable insight into a hitherto unsuspected side of Wylson's character. Through Drusilla it might be possible to punish Wylson brutally.

The next step was to establish Drusilla's identity, so, in between Daphne's light-hearted bursts of chatter, he reflected how best to begin. In view of the secrecy with which Wylson took care to cloak her this might not be too easy, he reflected. It seemed little use trying to learn anything from the staff at the night-club: if the dance hostesses had been unable to satisfy their curiosity it seemed very unlikely that an outsider would be more successful. No, enquiries would have to be made outside the walls of the club. But where? And when? How could one find out the address of a person whose name one did not even know?

To the last question only one obvious answer presented itself. Drusilla would have to be traced through Wylson. In other words, a watch would have to be kept upon Wylson in the hope—surely a very reasonable hope—that he would visit her one day, at her home; perhaps to fetch her, or perhaps to escort her back there.

Escort her back there! Tony warmed with the thrill of immediate action. Was there need to wait longer before making the first attempt to identify Drusilla? Without much doubt Wylson would be doing just that some time within the next few hours, as soon as they left the night-club. True; he might not take her home; he might do no more than take her to a hotel. But that, with luck, might prove good enough a start. A discreet enquiry, accompanied by a tactful bribe, might produce some information from the night porter: her name, or her address, or, at least, her room number.

Tony led Daphne back to the table. She was in a happy mood: it was nice to spend a whole evening with a man who was not anxious to paw her at every opportunity, or force her to drink more than she really wanted, or whisper remarks in her ears which she was quite content not to hear. Because of her gay mood he had little difficulty in steering the conversation back to the subject of Wylson again.

Being a millionaire, no doubt Wylson had a luxury car? A Rolls-Royce, according to the club commissioner, Daphne answered promptly. Was Wylson in the habit of staying long at the night-club? Not when Drusilla was with him: one o'clock

at the latest was his rule when she was his partner. Where did the Rolls remain all that time? A few buildings away in the underground garage which had a working arrangement with Maurice.

A few more questions satisfied Tony. He determined to shadow Wylson when he left the night-club. Having arrived at that decision, he invited Daphne to dance with him again. Before they had danced a dozen steps Daphne was surprised at the unexpectedly gay abandon with which he danced. How he could dance when he was in the mood! And what a sweet boy he was, she reflected, a trifle wistfully.

At twelve-forty-five Tony dismissed Daphne with a handsome tip, which she tried, sincerely, to refuse, paid his account, left the club premises, and went along to the club garage. There were three Rolls-Royce cars, but one was near the exit, and a chauffeur sat at the driving-wheel as though preparing to leave soon. Tony had no means of checking whether or no the car was Wylson's, but he determined to chance it. He approached his own car, and wasted several minutes in tinkering about with the engine, and lighting a cigarette, until he heard the sound of the Rolls purring into activity. Then he started up his own engine, and allowing time, not only for it to warm up, but also, he hoped, for Wylson and his companion to enter the Rolls, he drove the car up the slope which led to the road.

There he found that he had accurately estimated his timing. Wylson was assisting Drusilla into the car. Tony drove past the Rolls, and along the road. Farther along, at some cross roads, he halted the car, jumped out, lifted the bonnet, and pretended to examine the engine. A minute later the Rolls drove past. Waiting only long enough for it to get a short distance away from him, he hurried back into the car. The next moment he was following the car ahead of him.

He followed it into, and along the length of, Piccadilly; past Hyde Park Corner, past Knightsbridge, and past South Kensington, and so towards Hammersmith Broadway. And there luck deserted him. The Rolls crossed the traffic lights on the orange. As Tony prepared to cut in front of a long beast of a truck a police car drew level with him. With a groan he braked hard and swerved inwards. The police in the car grinned at him as if realizing that only their presence had saved him from breaking the law.

By the time the lights had changed to green the Rolls had disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TONY WAS NATURALLY DISAPPOINTED WITH THE TAME ENDING OF a plan which had held out every prospect of success, but it was with resignation that he turned the car at the first convenient opportunity and proceeded back to the flat which he occupied in Dolphin Square—doubtless there would be other opportunities of repeating the same tactics in the future, perhaps within the next twenty-four hours. With this hope to encourage him, he later postponed a previous date with Jerry Osborne, and went to La Belle Lorraine for the third night in succession.

Daphne was as delighted to see him again as he was to observe that Wylson's table was again reserved. They danced the hours away, with Daphne doing most of the talking and Tony the listening. Meanwhile, the night-club filled up as usual—indeed, it seemed more crowded than ever—but the one vacant table in the room remained unoccupied until midnight, by which time he had woefully arrived at the conclusion that the millionaire had no intention of visiting the club that night. Five minutes later he saw three people, whose faces he did not recognize, sit down at the table.

"Are those people friends of Wylson?" he asked the dance hostess.

She shook her blond curls. "No."

"Then what are they doing at his table?"

"It is understood that the table may be occupied, after midnight, on the fourth night of Wylson's stay in London."

"Does that mean Wylson is not coming to the club tomorrow?"

"He won't come along again for nearly three weeks if he follows his usual custom."

Tony smothered a heartfelt "Damn!" and thereafter left the club as soon as possible. Half an hour later he was in bed, and very glad, too, to be there, after three successive 'nights out'. The following morning he drove out to Datchet to see Penelope.

"Coming out to lunch, Penny? I have something to tell you."

Her answer was an immediate "Yes." Before long they were driving south-east at a steady, comfortable speed.

It did not take him long to tell her of the little that had taken place since their last meeting, but what he told her was enough to rouse her interest.

"What bad luck to have that police car interfering!" she commiserated feelingly. "Poor darling! Did you swear?"

He reflected. "I don't believe I did," he replied at last. "I must have been too fed-up."

She nodded her head understandingly. "I can appreciate your feelings. Now tell me why you have asked me to come driving with you this morning."

"To have the pleasure of your company, of course, Penny, my love."

"You could have had that by remaining at Datchet."

"Then, to tell you what happened last night, and the night before."

"That, too, you could have done just as easily at Datchet. Come, 'fess up, Tony; you have an ulterior motive in asking me to accompany you, haven't you?"

He nodded. "I want you to come on a pub-crawl with me."

"In the neighbourhood of Leatherhead?" she asked shrewdly.

"Yes. We know that at least four men live at *Three Ways* with Wylson. It wouldn't be natural if one, or probably more, of those men did not visit one of the locals now and again. If we can find out which local we might make some enquiries which would lead us to that mysterious Drusilla of his."

"It will be like looking for a needle in a haystack, but it is worth trying. I wonder why he keeps her identity a secret."

"The only reason I can think of is that she is married to someone else."

"Was she wearing a wedding-ring?"

"I—I didn't get a chance of seeing her—her fingers."

"What you really mean, my darling, is that you were too busy looking at her face to spare the time to see her fingers. Still, I doubt whether it would have helped much to have seen them. If she were married to someone else, she would probably have taken the precaution of taking her wedding-ring off."

"I don't believe she is married."

"Why?"

"She looks—well, unmarried."

"But if she is unmarried, and if she and Wylson are in love

with each other, it is difficult to think of any reason for their wishing to keep her identity secret."

"I know."

"Of course," Penelope continued musingly, "it might be that she has been forbidden by her parents to go out with Wylson. In such circumstances, any mention of her presence at the night-club in the gossip columns of a newspaper or magazine might reveal her secret."

"She looks more than twenty-one years of age, Penny, and is old enough to choose her own friends."

"She might be the daughter of a bishop, or someone like that who would frown upon her frequenting a night-club."

"Then why doesn't she marry Wylson, so that she might go as often as she pleased?"

"Perhaps he hasn't asked her."

"I am sure there is an understanding between them," Tony said firmly. "Drusilla is not the kind of girl to look with adoring eyes at a man unless he had asked her to marry him."

Penelope laughed softly. "You big baby! You know nothing of women."

"I know you will agree with me when you see Drusilla for yourself."

"She appears to have captured your interest very effectively," Penelope commented drily.

"Don't be silly, Penny. Of course she hasn't. She is just a nice girl, and that is all." He grinned. "Besides, I don't see why you should be so dog-in-the-mangerish, Penny. As you won't marry me, I don't see why you should object to my looking at other girls now and again."

"I have no objection to your looking at other girls," she denied tartly. "Moreover, if you are trying to make me jealous, with your enthusiastic descriptions of Drusilla and Daphne, you have been singularly unsuccessful." She hastened to change the conversation. "What do you hope to learn from visiting the public-houses near *Three Ways*?"

"It is possible that Drusilla may live not far from there——"

"What makes you think so?"

"Two reasons. The first, that a surprisingly high proportion of marriages are between people living in the same neighbourhood. My second reason is far-fetched, Penny, but we ought not to overlook even the slenderest clue. I lost sight of Wylson's car

at Hammersmith. Hammersmith lies on one of the routes from the West End to the Leatherhead district."

"It is also on the route to Richmond and Kingston, to Slough and Windsor, to Sunningdale and Blackwater, to Ealing, and Uxbridge and Amersham."

"You need not rub it in; I admitted I was drawing a long-bow. But a start must be made somewhere."

Penelope agreed. After all, it was a very pleasant way of starting. So pleasant that she was almost tempted to hope that today's enquiries might prove unsuccessful, in which case Tony would undoubtedly continue them another day, and perhaps yet another day. . . .

II

Tony made their first port of call a house which proudly called itself the *Prince of Wales*. It was a small place, but looked reasonably old and cheerful; the sort of pub at which a man might be glad to drop in after a day's work.

The *Prince of Wales* had the usual two doors: one was marked Public Bar and the other Saloon. They entered this latter door, to find the saloon small, cosy and empty. It was not empty for long: scarcely had they had time to sit down on two particularly creaky basket chairs when a man appeared from a door across the room, and waddled over the floor towards the small bar. 'Waddled' was the only word adequately to describe his progress, for he was the shortest, tubbiest man either of the visitors could remember having met.

"'Morning, gent; 'mornin, miss," he greeted them wheezily. "Wind's a bit fresh this morning."

Tony agreed that it was, and ordered a gin-and-lime for Penelope, a pink gin for himself. "And how about yourself, landlord?" he added.

"Don't mind if I do, sir." The man drew a tankard of foaming ale and gazed at it with a glistening eye. "My best respects," he wheezed, as he raised the tankard to his lips. He took only one swallow, then, to the accompaniment of a loud, contented sigh, he replaced the tankard on the bar with a loud thump. To Tony's astonishment he saw that the tankard was empty: it did not seem possible that half a pint could disappear so easily and so effortlessly.

"Nice day for a run, though," the man continued, picking up

the thread of conversation which had preceded the serving of the drinks.

Opportunity thus offered for a talk with the garrulous landlord, so Tony made himself affable, and soon brought the conversation round to *Three Ways*, and its occupier, Xavier Wylson. The result was disappointing. The landlord knew *Three Ways*; he had seen Xavier Wylson; he let slip the information that, in all, eight people were employed at the house—the two bodyguards, the chauffeur, the butler, two maids, a cook, and a housekeeper—but as none of them ever visited the *Prince of Wales* his interest in the house and its occupants was confined to a few unpleasant remarks which were obviously prejudiced, and contained nothing of interest to the visitors. So Tony and Penelope left the *Prince of Wales* and drove half a mile to the *Plough and Horses*.

This house was far larger, aggressively new, but evidently a popular rendezvous, for it had its own car park and petrol station, a notice: 'No Motor-Coach parties catered for', a restaurant, a saloon bar and a private bar, a small dance room—'Dances every Saturday night, with Gini Tini and his Rumba Boys'.

Tony had had no hope of finding the saloon bar of the *Plough and Horses* vacant, but he was pleased to see that only four other people were present, two men and two girls, and these sat round a rush and plate-glass table in the corner farthest from the bar. Penelope and he therefore occupied two of the leather-topped revolving stools before a chromium-plated cocktail bar, and a blond-haired woman who might have been an older, and slightly raddled, Daphne.

She flashed Tony a tooth-revealing smile. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Bright Eyes," he returned cheerfully. "Gin-and-lime and a pink gin."

"Water or soda, sir?"

"Soda, my dear, with the gin-and-lime. For myself, I like my drinks as I like women; neat, short, and many of 'em. And what are you having, Bright Eyes?"

The barmaid glanced at Penelope. "Isn't he a one? I'll have a small port."

After she had sipped her port, the girl continued: "Not very busy this morning. Not like it was last Sunday morning. The place was that packed none of us knew whether we was on our heads or our heels."

"People from town?"

"What do you think?" she asked scornfully. "Most of the important people who live in these parts wouldn't visit the *Plough and Horses*. Not them. They go to the *Royal Arms*."

"Why?"

"Just because it's kept by the grandson of a man whose aunt married a Lord Somebody or Other fifty years ago. You wouldn't get me to go and have a drink in that stuffy little hole even if a dook served me, that I wouldn't. It gives one the willies, that place. Not like this here, all bright and cheerful-like."

It took Tony the best part of half a minute to persuade the barmaid to leave the *Royal Arms* and return to the *Plough and Horses*. Presently he brought the conversation round to Xavier Wylson. Didn't he live somewhere in the neighbourhood?

"Yes." She jerked her synthetic-blond curls in a northerly direction. "Just a stone's throw from here—if you're good at throwing stones."

"I've heard that he is a millionaire. Do you ever see anything of him here, Bright Eyes?"

"Him! Not blooming likely."

"Is he one of those who visit the *Royal Arms*?"

She laughed stridently. "Evidently you don't know much about Mr. Blooming Wylson. He wouldn't be seen dead inside a public. Not even the *Royal Arms*."

"Don't tell me he doesn't drink?"

"Don't ask me whether he drinks or not. I don't know no more about him than the next person. Keeps himself to himself, that Mr. Wylson. Not even his servants talk about him. And I should know *that*, seeing how often I sees one or another of them."

Tony concealed his delight. "So they condescend to come here sometimes?"

"They do and all. Leastwise, three of them does. They're good spenders. I'll say that much for them. Beyond that——" She shrugged her plump shoulders, glanced round to see that nobody was about, leaned nearer to Tony, and muttered in a low voice: "I'm broad-minded, I am, dear, but it wouldn't worry me none if those three men never came into this house, even though they treats me to a port every now and again."

"Why not, Bright Eyes? Do they want too much for their ports?"

"Not they, and they wouldn't get it even if they did want it.

No. It's their blooming—their blooming——” She seemed unable to choose an adequate word. “I don't know what's the right word to use, dear, but what I means is their way of looking at you if you as much as dares mention *Three Ways*. They seems to say: ‘Don't you talk of that place, or we'll knock you for six. What we does there is our own business, and we don't want nobody else to go poking their noses into what doesn't concern them.’ Of course, ducky, they don't really say that, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes, indeed. • What you mean is that there's a bit of a mystery about *Three Ways* of which you know nothing?”

“Nor anyone else around here, neither.” She straightened up and gave Tony one of her most dazzling smiles. He wondered why—until he discovered that it was not intended for him, but for some fresh clients who had just arrived: old acquaintances, apparently, for they called her Clara, and she said: “Go away with you, Mr. George,” when one of the men said that she did not seem to be in a drinking mood today.

When it became apparent that the newcomers had come to stay, and that further private conversation with Clara was unlikely, Tony signalled to Penelope. Unnoticed by the barmaid, who was now too occupied to pay any attention to them, they slipped off their high stools and left the building. They walked to the car park and entered the car. Tony pressed the self-starter. As the engine chattered into life Penelope said: “Tony.”

There was a strange note in her voice which caused him to turn sharply towards her.

“Is something wrong?”

“Light a cigarette for yourself, while I say something.”

This he did, while Penelope continued: “Don't turn immediately, Tony, but when you can, take a look out of your window at that dark blue car on the far side of the car park, with the registration FQX 62 something or other—the driver is reading a newspaper.”

Tony turned, and threw the dead match out of the window.

“What about it, Penny?”

“The same car was outside the *Prince of Wales* when we left there.”

He laughed. “Well, really, Penny dear——”

“It was also outside Mrs. Greenwood's house when we left Datchet,” she continued coolly.

This information startled him. "Was it, by George!" But after slight reflection he chuckled. "You are imagining things, Penny. That car is an Austin. There are thousands of dark blue Austins on the road. It might be the same one you saw outside the *Prince of Wales*—perhaps its owner likes pub-crawling—but it couldn't be the one that was at Datchet."

"I am sure it is," she declared firmly.

"Did you notice its number?"

"No," she was forced to admit.

"Well, then, what makes you think it is the same?"

"Its—its lines."

"But many hundreds of Austins have exactly similar lines."

"I know, but——"

"But you still think it has been following us about?"

"Yes."

"Why? And to whom do you think it might belong?"

"To Xavier Wylson."

"Nonsense, Penny. Wylson couldn't possibly know we were making enquiries about him."

"That precious Daphne of yours might have said something to Maurice, and Maurice may have passed on a warning to Wylson."

"Daphne is too feather-brained to have suspected that I was pumping her," he stated confidently. "But we can soon put the matter to a test."

"How?"

"You'll see."

As though he had merely been waiting to finish off the cigarette before driving off, Tony made a display of throwing away the half-smoked cigarette. Then he put the engine into low gear and drove slowly into the road, where he turned to the left.

As soon as the engine was in top gear he cruised along the road until he came to a convenient bend. There he pulled in to the side of the road, jumped out of the car, and used the old pretext of examining the engine. During the next two minutes scores of cars came round the corner—including some dark blue Austins—and passed by, but the Austin which had been in the *Plough and Horses* car park was not among them.

At last Tony got back into the car.

"Are you satisfied, Penny?"

"I suppose I must be," she agreed dubiously.

They drove on to the *Horseshoe Inn*, but though Tony kept watch in the driving-mirror he saw nothing to indicate that they were being shadowed by a following car. They entered the *Horseshoe Inn*, where once again he ordered a gin-and-lime for Penelope, a pink gin for himself, and offered the barman a drink.

The visit to the *Horseshoe Inn* proved fruitless. The barman had never heard of either Xavier Wylson or of a house called *Three Ways*, so they left quickly and returned to the car. There was no sign of the blue Austin.

"And now?" Penelope asked.

"I believe there's a house not far off called the *Hare and Hounds*. When we have been there we can turn off to the left and double back on our tracks until we find the *Royal Arms*. I have a feeling we may learn something at the *Royal Arms* despite what Clara thinks."

This programme they carried out, interrupting it at the *George Hotel* to have luncheon. Unfortunately, their time was wasted. In one or two houses neither Xavier Wylson nor *Three Ways* was known. In two the barman had some knowledge, either of the man or the house, but so little that its retelling added nothing to Tony's meagre store of information. He did have the impression, however, that Wylson neither received nor was received by the more important residents of the district. It would seem that he had made *Three Ways* a small world of his own, which visitors were not encouraged to visit.

So to the *Royal Arms*, a tiny, cheerful place which, from the outside, looked as though its original structure dated back to Bluff King Hal. There was only one door into the building, and Tony had to bend his head to pass through. Having done so, he and Penelope found themselves in a narrow, flagged passage with an old oak door on either side. On one was painted in white letters the inevitable Private Bar; on the other, the equally inevitable Public Bar. They entered the Private Bar.

"Well, well, well!" a brisk voice greeted them. "So we meet again, Mr. Verrell. This is an unexpected pleasure."

The speaker was Detective-Sergeant George Grant.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"HULLO, MR. GRA—— GREGORY," TONY SAID WEAKLY. "THIS IS a surprise."

Grant chuckled. "Yes, isn't it? It's quite a distance from La Belle Lorraine to the *Royal Arms*! But there is nobody I could welcome more, at this moment, than Miss Sladen and yourself."

"Why?"

"Because it gives me an opportunity to return your hospitality. I can still taste that excellent drop of brandy you ordered for me the other night. They have some brandy here—of a kind. Will you risk some, Miss Sladen?"

"I would prefer a sherry, Mr. Gregory," she replied coolly.

"Why not?" For a moment the detective's gaze rested upon Penelope—with involuntary admiration, it seemed to Tony, whom Grant addressed the next moment. "But you will try the brandy, Mr. Verrell?"

"Thanks, I will. By the way, how is the ankle?"

"Almost recovered, I am glad to say." Grant touched a handbell which stood on one of the three tables grouped around the room. Its silvery tinkle brought a young, fresh-faced barman into the room, to whom Grant gave an order for two brandies and a sherry.

While the barman went out to execute the order Grant continued: "Will you excuse me if I sit down, Miss Sladen? The ankle doesn't like being overworked."

"Of course." Tony drew a chair nearer the cheerful log fire which crackled in the grate, and Penelope sat down. The two men followed her example.

"It's strange your coming in here today," Gregory began conversationally. "This is the first time I have visited this house. In fact, I do not know this part of the country at all, except the main coast roads. Do you know it well, Mr. Verrell?"

"Just so-so! I mooch around now and again, when I have nothing better to do."

"Ah! But you are one of the lucky people who do not have to work for your living."

"That is not fair to Tony, Mr. Gregory. What makes you think he does not have to work?"

The question disconcerted Grant. "Well, Miss Sladen, knowing Mr. Verrell to be the son of a famous writer, and having met him, first at a night-club, and now here, in the country, I am afraid I jumped to conclusions——" His words tailed off.

"Do you work for a living, Mr. Gregory?"

"Yes."

"You, also, were at the night-club ; you, also, are here in the country. As a matter of fact, Tony is studying for the Bar."

"Ah ! So the law interests you, Mr. Verrell ?"

"Naturally. I am hoping to make it my career."

Grant laughed.

"Why do you laugh ?" Penelope demanded sharply.

"At a humorous thought. Mr. Verrell's father is interested in the glorification of crime, while Mr. Verrell himself leans towards the punishment of the criminal. There should be scope for debate between them."

"My father is not interested in the *glorification* of crime," Tony said sharply. "On the contrary, most of his books contain a moral—that crime is mean and sordid, and does not pay."

"And the 'Diamond Dumont' series?" Grant muttered in a dry voice.

Tony grinned. Grant had him there ! For 'Diamond Dumont', one of Richard Verrell's fictional characters—and a firm favourite with the public—was a jewel-thief whose charm and humanness endeared him to the public, but whose skill at defeating the efforts of the police to arrest him permitted the narration of his escapades to be told in one volume after another.

The detective pursued his advantage. "You see, Mr. Verrell ! Your father's Mr. Dumont all but encourages a weakling to turn to crime, by making it apparently very easy for any man with intelligence to commit crime without any fear of arrest. So the weakling tries to emulate the example of his favourite hero, only to learn, too late and painfully, that the police are not such fools as your father, and other authors, make them out to be."

"But your weaklings are never men of intelligence."

"Do you think that a man of intelligence can persistently defy the police and get away with it ?" Grant asked swiftly.

Tony thought of the many years throughout which Blackshirt had successfully eluded all police attempts to identify and arrest him. "Yes," he said cheerfully. "My belief is that an intelligent man, working independently, could escape arrest."

"That is a dangerous theory, Mr. Verrell."

"Dangerous !" Tony repeated. "Why ?"

Grant pursed his lips in apparent annoyance with himself. "What I meant was that it would be dangerous for anyone, contemplating a criminal career, to hold such a theory. Take yourself, for instance. Supposing——"

"Why choose me as your example?" Tony asked innocently. "I am not contemplating a criminal career."

"I prefaced my remark with the word *supposing*," Grant replied with some asperity. "I merely thought of you because you are young, adventurous and reckless; a nature such as yours might find it difficult to adapt itself to a normal, humdrum existence."

"You seem to know quite a lot about me."

"That is your own fault."

"My fault! Why?"

"For becoming too famous, Mr. Verrell. Boys of all ages, and would-be aviators, still talk of the exploits of Squadron-Leader Anthony Verrell. As for the estimate of your nature, it would be difficult to suppose that an ace night fighter, D.S.O., D.F.C., with bar, could be anything else other than young, adventurous, and reckless," Grant explained drily. "But for the purpose of our discussion let us imagine a mythical Mr. Smith. Our Mr. Smith might believe himself so clever as to be capable of committing crime without fearing arrest. Perhaps for the sake of adventure rather than gain he might begin his life of crime. For a time he might be successful. But the time would come when he would find himself overtaken by Nemesis——"

"Why?" Penelope interrupted sweetly.

"Why, because the man isn't born who does not make at least one mistake in his life. Many of us—most of us, in fact—make many more than one. The moment our Mr. Smith made his first mistake it would be all up with him. The police would get on his track, and, mark my words, sooner or later they would catch up with him. Somehow, I do not believe Mr. Smith would feel nearly so clever when he found himself in the dock at Old Bailey being prosecuted—who knows?—perhaps by yourself, Mr. Verrell! You did say, didn't you, that you were interested in the punishment of crime?"

Penelope smiled. "The Treasury might not be so convinced of Tony's talents as Tony himself is; then he would have to appear for the criminal instead of against him, Mr. Grant."

"Well, there is a fascination——" The detective's words ceased abruptly. His eyes and his face became hard. "By what name did you call me?" he demanded in a steely voice.

A moment of uneasy silence followed. Penelope's eyes filled with self-reproach. Presently Tony shrugged his shoulders.

"After you had left La Belle Lorraine the other night Maurice

was surprised to hear us refer to you as Mr. Gregory, so he informed us of your true name. He asked us, jokingly, whether we had done anything to make us wanted by the police."

"I see!" Grant muttered. "I had forgotten Maurice's boast that he never forgets a face. He must have seen me giving evidence in Court at some time or other. My apologies for misinforming you, Mr. Verrell, as to my name, but, frankly, I did not want anyone at the night-club to know that I was a detective."

"That sounds as if you were on business, Mr. Grant."

There was a note of thrilled excitement and curiosity in Penelope's voice which prompted the detective to turn his head and gaze directly at her. Tony remained still and tense, marveling at Penelope's self-control and her ability to dissemble. She was superb, he reflected. Nobody, seeing her eager, open face, would suspect for a moment that she had anything to fear from the stern-faced detective who faced her.

Evidently he was not alone in reaching this conclusion, for a shadow of uncertainty passed across Grant's eyes.

"Yes," he admitted uneasily. "Yes, I was."

Penelope laughed excitedly. "How fascinating!" She turned towards Tony, and he saw that her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were shining. "Fancy our sitting there telling each other what a very ordinary place the club was, when all the time one of the guests was under police observation! That is the right term to use, isn't it, Mr. Grant?"

"It is."

"I do wish we could have known the truth at the time: it would have been fun to have tried to guess which guest was the object of your observation. Oh dear! Now I wish you had not told us why you were at the club."

"I am not aware of having told you very much. But why?"

"Because you have made me curious, and I know I must not ask you to divulge official secrets."

Grant pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and offered them: Tony believed that his reason for doing so was to gain time for reflection. This conviction was apparently confirmed by Grant's slowness in offering a light.

As soon as all three of them were smoking Grant said in a deliberate voice: "As a matter of fact, you are mistaken in thinking that I was keeping anyone in particular under observation."

"Oh!" Penelope simulated surprise. "If it was not somebody, then it must have been something. The club? Has Maurice been infringing against the law? What a shame if the club has to be closed down! He seemed such a nice man."

"As far as I know the police have nothing against either Maurice or the club. Can I rely upon your confidence?"

"Oh yes!" Penelope replied eagerly.

"Naturally," Tony echoed.

"Then there is no reason why I should not tell you of my reason for being at the club," Grant began. "I think the story is one which should be of particular interest to you, Mr. Verrell."

"Me again!" Tony exclaimed comically. "Of what am I being accused this time?"

"I was referring to your interest in the punishment of criminals."

"Well?"

"I do not want to make the story too long, so I will tell you very briefly that, a short time ago, it came to my—to the notice of the Criminal Investigation Department that an unknown person is carrying out a campaign which can be described as idealistic because it is directed against a certain class of people whose conduct either has been, or still is, despicable."

"I am not sure that I quite follow you," Tony murmured vaguely.

Grant did not lose patience. "Supposing I quote you an instance of a typical Black Market racketeer of the past war. This unknown person of ours——"

"Do you mean our Mr. Smith?"

Penelope choked, and hastily turned her head away to conceal her laughter.

"For the sake of giving him a name, why not call him that?" Grant agreed equably. "Mr. Smith, then, having decided that the racketeer, and others, ought to be punished for their contemptible operations, has been taking the law into his own hands, by inflicting some hurt, damage or injury upon the persons concerned."

"Well, I'm damned!" Tony ejaculated.

Penelope was more subtle. "I do not understand, Mr. Grant. Do you mean that Mr. Smith has done some injury or other to Mr. Brown, because Mr. Brown was a Black Market racketeer?"

"That is what I do mean."

"Then if it were known that Mr. Brown was a racketeer, why did not the police charge him with his crime?"

"Mr. Verrell can answer that question as well as I."

"I say, Sergeant," Tony protested. "You seem to have your knife into me this afternoon. I don't know a darn' thing about Black Market racketeering."

"That is not what I meant," Grant denied stolidly. "As you are studying for the law you must know that it is one thing for the police to *know* that a man is guilty of a crime, but another to produce in Court legal evidence to *prove* that guilt to a jury."

Tony nodded his head. "What Mr. Grant says is quite right, Penny. As the text-books say: the prosecution is bound to establish a charge beyond all reasonable doubt; mere probability, however strong, will not suffice."

"As I was saying, our Mr. Smith has taken upon himself the duties not only of police, but of judge, jury and executioner as well. And, strange though it may seem, the powers-that-be have a strong objection to their duties being usurped."

"Don't blame 'em," Tony agreed heartily. "But what has all this to do with the night-club?"

Grant's eyes smouldered. "There was reason to believe that both Mr. Smith and Mr. Brown were there the night I twisted my ankle."

"Were they, by George! What did you do, Sergeant? Did you arrest Mr. Smith? Or did you warn Mr. Brown of his danger?"

"I did neither," Grant replied tersely.

"You didn't! Why not?"

The detective stared at Tony. "Because I did not then know the identity of either man."

Tony made a gesture of perplexity. "Then how do you know they were there?"

"Because, since then, I have discovered their identities, Mr. Verrell, and recollect having seen them there."

Penelope laughed with excitement. "Really, Mr. Grant? Beyond all reasonable doubt, as Tony's musty old law books say?"

There was exasperation in the detective's eyes as he glanced at Penelope. "That is what one might call an official secret," he replied sourly.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Grant. I should not have asked that question, should I? But I am sure of one thing. Your diplo-

matic answer means that, even if you didn't arrest Mr. Smith at La Belle Lorraine, you hope to do so in the near future."

"Perhaps!"

"That is the stuff to give 'em," Tony chimed in. "What are you going to charge him with, Sergeant?"

"What charge would you suggest?"

Tony was delighted to have a chance of answering the question. "Let me see now, under what heading should Mr. Smith's crimes be charged—Offences against Public Justice? Perjury or subornation? No bribery? No personation? Has he impersonated anyone, Sergeant?"

"I have no knowledge that he has done so."

"A pity! Extortion? Perhaps—but surely Mr. Brown wouldn't be too willing to give evidence on that count, would he?"

"Probably not. Go on, Mr. Verrell."

"I had better try under another heading. Offences against the Public Peace. Ah! What about sending a letter threatening to burn or destroy houses? That sounds possible. If he has done so our Mr. Smith would be liable for a maximum sentence of—let me see—something like ten years' penal servitude, if I remember rightly. Do you know whether he has ever sent such a letter?"

"I do not," Grant replied, thin-lipped.

Tony chuckled. "Perhaps Mr. Smith telephoned, instead of sending a letter," he suggested. "Then there wouldn't be any evidence to produce in Court, would there?"

"No."

"Do you know, Sergeant, I can think of a hundred crimes, but not one, off-hand, which could apply to Mr. Smith; not one, that is to say, which it would be easy to prove. Of course, I am still only a student——"

"With a very sound knowledge of your subject, if I may say so, sir. Perhaps Mr. Smith has as sound a knowledge."

"There is nothing to stop his buying books on the subject, and studying them."

"Quite, but there is a difference between reading about the law and understanding the working of the law."

"Don't I know that too well, Sergeant? But I did say, didn't I, that an intelligent man has a better chance than Tom, Dick or Harry of avoiding arrest? I can imagine that if our Mr. Smith were really intelligent in dealing with Mr. Brown he

would take care not to supply any evidence which might be used against him in the event of Mr. Brown's being willing to co-operate with the police, which is unlikely, don't you think, in the case of a Black Market racketeer, who might have almost as much to fear from the police as from Mr. Smith?"

Grant nodded. "Agreed! But I replied, didn't I, that every man makes a mistake sooner or later? For instance, supposing our Mr. Smith had only known about the—er—misdoings of Mr. Brown for the first time on the night I was at La Belle Lorraine——"

"Well?"

"It might occur to Mr. Smith to punish Mr. Brown, as he, Mr. Smith, had previously punished other Mr. Browns, might it not?"

"It might," Tony agreed casually.

"What would be Mr. Smith's next step, do you think? Myself, I believe, he would begin to make enquiries into Mr. Brown's private affairs so as to discover the best punishment—or the worst, if you prefer."

"That sounds feasible."

"Now suppose that a certain detective by the name of Mr. Robinson——"

"Or Mr. Gregory!" Penelope interrupted.

"All right!" the detective snapped. "Mr. Gregory! Suppose that Gregory had a shrewd suspicion of the identity of Mr. Smith, but not of Mr. Brown. I think Gregory might decide to keep a watch on Mr. Smith in the hope of being led to Mr. Brown. Do you follow me?"

"As easily as Gregory followed Smith," Tony assured Grant.

"Good! Now suppose that Mr. Smith was foolish enough to visit a succession of public-houses in order to make enquiries about a certain Mr.—er—Jones, wouldn't that be a mistake on the part of Mr. Smith? Of course it would, for it would inform Mr. Gregory that the identity of Mr. Brown was really Mr. Jones."

"So what?" Tony asked cheerfully. "There is no crime in making enquiries, is there? Perhaps Smith is merely anxious to find out whether Jones plays golf, in order to fix up a match."

"Of course, there is no crime in making enquiries, Mr. Verrell. The trouble is——" Grant paused to stare reflectively at the bottom of his brandy glass.

"Well?"

The detective drained his glass. "It would be so easy for him to make a second mistake," he murmured in a dry voice.

CHAPTER NINE

NOTHING MORE OF SIGNIFICANCE WAS SAID FOLLOWING GRANT'S inferred warning, so presently Penelope and Tony took their leave of the detective and left. They re-entered their car and drove off in a north-westerly direction. Nearly two minutes passed before either of them spoke. Then Penelope said:

"You are making for Datchet, of course?"

"I am, but why the 'of course'?"

"That detective knows everything, Tony."

"Knows, or suspects?"

She did not reply immediately, but stared at the road ahead, as if giving reflection to his question.

"Suspects," she admitted at last. "He is almost certain of himself, but not quite—he still has some doubts of us."

He chuckled, and taking his left hand away from the steering-wheel he let it rest for a moment upon her hands, which were resting upon her lap, clasped together.

"I am not surprised, Penny darling. You were magnificent. Your air of carefree innocence would have deceived old Solomon himself."

She nodded. "If only we had not made that first mistake I think the sergeant would be even more doubtful, but he can scarcely help wondering why anyone should take the trouble to visit one public-house after another, apparently for no other purpose than to ask questions about a certain Mr. Wylson and his home."

"I have acted like a tarnation fool," he admitted, somewhat morosely. "I ought to have proceeded in a more subtle manner."

She was immediately on the defensive on his behalf. "You have no reason for reproaching yourself. I am sure your questions would not have betrayed you but for the fact that the sergeant already suspected you, and was following you about. Poor Mr. Grant."

"Poor Mr. Grant! I like that! Why the sympathy for that

Nosy Parker? I'll bet he is a tough nut capable of looking after himself."

"Perhaps, Tony dear, but I believe that, in his own way, he rather likes and admires you."

"My dear girl, you are crazy," Tony informed her.

"No, I am not, Tony."

"What on earth has given you the idea that he likes me?"

"He could have remained silent on the subject of Mr. Smith. He could have pretended that the meeting at the *Royal Arms* was absolutely accidental—in fact, he could have seen to it that you did not meet him there——"

"For the love of Mike, Penny, you are not suggesting that Grant expected us to call at the *Royal Arms*?"

"I think he guessed that there was every possibility of your doing so."

"How could he have done so?"

"No doubt, from something the fair charmer at the *Plough and Horses* let out—Bright Eyes, I think you called her," she explained drily.

"Go on," Tony urged grimly, after a pause.

"I believe that Grant went to the *Royal Arms* in the hope of meeting and trapping you into betraying yourself—remember that he did not, then, know that we were aware of his real identity. When I foolishly revealed that we did know he changed his tactics. Instead of continuing to try and trap you into an admission, he let you know, by inference, that you were under suspicion, and that if you were to continue with your work of punishing that beastly Xavier Wylson, you would do so at your peril."

He could find no fault with Penelope's reasoning. "I think you may be right, old girl. Well, well, well! Fancy old Grant being sport enough to warn me off. But I still say he is a tough nut," he concluded challengingly.

"Of course he is. He is ambitious, and means to succeed in his career. If you had failed to heed his warning, Tony, you would have found him a dangerous opponent."

"What is all this 'if you had' business? Surely you do not think I am going to let old Thingumabob's interference make any difference to my plans?"

Penelope was suddenly alarmed. "But you must!" she declared sharply. "You cannot continue."

"Why not?"

"Because Grant suspects you, Tony——"

"What of that fact? You heard Grant himself admit that it is one thing for the police to suspect a man of a crime, and quite another to prove it to judge and jury."

"You must realize, Tony, that if you continue, all the resources of Scotland Yard will be used against you. Everywhere you go you will be followed, everything you do will be reported to Sergeant Grant; perhaps all your correspondence will be opened at the General Post Office, and every telephone conversation overheard."

"A cheerful accomplice you are, Penny! And what do you propose I should do? Sit back and let old Wylson get on with that filthy political wangle of his?"

"You must," she replied swiftly. "Promise me that you will."

"No jolly fear, old girl. But what I will promise, if it will make you feel any happier——"

"Well?"

"I'll lie low for the time being, until we find out who that girl Drusilla really is."

"How can you do that if you lie low, Tony?"

"That is the point, darling. I am not going to do anything, and old Thingum-bob can shadow me to his heart's content."

"You will leave the rest to me?" Penelope asked breathlessly, excitedly.

"And you, too, a suspect—or, a semi-suspect, at least, my gay deceiver! No, old girl, I think it's time we co-opted some assistants."

"Not—not Jerry and the other boys?"

"Jerry and the boys," Tony confirmed with a grin.

II

Jerry was Gerald Osborne; the 'boys' were Stephen Martin and Edward Dixon respectively. All were ex-R.A.F. night fighters, and all had once served in Tony's squadron. The comradeship which had grown up between them during the hectic days of war had not lessened with the increasing serenity of peace. True, they did not see each other so often as when they had messed together, but they met regularly, on the first Monday evening of each month, in a private room at *Chez*

François, a French restaurant in Soho, and there yarned together on subjects past, present and future.

Within five minutes of his return to Dolphin Square Tony was on the telephone to Jerry. If there were a closer bond of sympathy between Tony and Jerry than between Tony and either of the other two, perhaps this was due to Jerry's more sober nature—and also, perhaps, because Jerry was still flying as a civilian pilot. Tony was not alone in looking up to Jerry; the other two did so, too. Jerry was less reckless than they; although just as willing to leap, he usually looked—and thought—before doing so. He had, also, an extraordinary reserve of common sense, and an encyclopaedic knowledge which resulted in the others regarding him more or less as a sage.

"Hullo, Jerry. Are you doing anything special next Monday evening?"

"Monday? No, Tony, nothing special. I had thought of going to the cinema, but I can go Tuesday instead. Why?"

"I want to call an extraordinary meeting of the O-Sixers."

The O-Sixers had been Stephen's brainwave. The squadron to which they had all belonged had had those two figures at the end of its number. One night the four men had been discussing the merits—not to say the demerits—of several squadrons of which one or another had knowledge. During the course of the discussion Stephen had said: "Well, that lot cannot beat the record of us O-Sixers, anyway." From that moment the name had stuck: henceforward they referred to one another as an O-Sixer, and whenever their monthly reunion was held it was a meeting of the O-Sixers.

"That's all right as far as I am concerned," Jerry said promptly. "But what's the idea, Tony? Your voice sounds excited. You are not going to spring your marriage upon us, or something of that sort?"

"No such luck. I can't say anything now, Jerry, but if you can make it on Monday night—well, you may hear something to your advantage, as the saying goes."

"Right you are. Usual time?"

"Yes."

"Will you make arrangements with old *François*, or would you like me to?"

On the point of saying that he was intending to fix with *François* after hearing from Stephen and Edward, Tony paused. If Penelope had been justified in prophesying that everything

he did might be reported to Scotland Yard, Grant might receive information of the meeting, and perhaps try to take part in the proceedings by means of a hidden microphone. In fact, it was even possible that the conversation between Jerry and himself was being recorded while they spoke together. He thought quickly of everything that had been said so far, and sighed his relief that no useful information had been divulged.

Tony's eyes became serious. For the first time he realized the unhappy consequences of ceasing to be a law-abiding citizen. His life might no longer be private. Wherever he went, unseen watchers would follow. If he went for a shave, Scotland Yard would be informed of that fact. If he went to the theatre, a Scotland Yard man would be lurking not far off, waiting for him to come out again. If he called upon his father, Grant would hear of the visit. If a friend wrote to him, Scotland Yard would note down that friend's name and address, with a view to investigating the friend also. If his mother telephoned, Grant would be told of every word she said.

"What is the matter, Tony? Why do you not answer?"

"I am sorry. I was thinking. Would you mind doing as you suggest?"

"Of course."

"And Jerry, will you do me another favour? Would you mind telephoning the rest of the O-Sixers?"

"Yes, I'll do that gladly, old son." There was a vague note of surprise in Jerry's voice, but he made no comment. That was Jerry all over, Tony reflected. If either Stephen or Edward had been at the other end of the connection a wisecrack would have been the inevitable sequel to the request.

"And if everything is fixed up satisfactorily, would you give me a ring just to say okay?" Tony stressed the last word in the hope that Jerry would understand that he was to say no more than that.

Perhaps Jerry did comprehend, for he chuckled, and said: "Okay, Tony."

"One last thing! Would it be convenient for you to do all your telephoning from a call-box?"

"Well, I'll be——" Jerry began. Then he paused. "All right," he said presently, in a calmer voice. "You can rely on me."

"Thanks a lot."

Jerry disconnected. Tony held on for a second or two,

listening for 'he sound of a second click from a third party listening-in—if there were one—but he heard only the ringing tone.

Nearly one hour later Jerry 'phoned back.

"Okay, Tony. We shall all be there next Monday." Before Tony could express his thanks Jerry rang off. Tony chuckled. A nod was as good as a wink to old Jerry! he reflected.

III

During the next two days Tony led an uncomfortable existence. He learned for himself what it means to be a hunted man. At first he tried to be normal; at his usual time he sat down at his desk, and tried to digest from Mr. Snell's weighty *Principles of Equity* the difference between a *donatio mortis causa* and a gift *inter vivos*. The attempt was entirely unsuccessful. Before long he found himself mumbling something to the effect that a *donatio inter causa* was a *mortis vivos*, which was not only bad Latin, but rather absurd. As a measure of light relief he switched over to Harris's *Criminal Law*, but reading that: "Unlawfully and maliciously setting fire to any matter or thing, being in, against, or under any building, under such circumstances that if the building were thereby set fire to the offence would amount to felony, is a felony, punishable by penal servitude to the extent of fourteen years," reminded him very forcibly that he had unlawfully and maliciously set fire to a matter and thing, belonging to Mr. Murger, which, being in and against Mr. Murger's home, therefore made him liable for penal servitude to the extent of fourteen years.

This comforting reflection brought his law studies to an end. After due consideration he decided to take the bull by the horns and venture out of his flat, so that any watchful eyes might have their fill of him. Let them report to Detective-Sergeant Grant that he had taken a bus to Westminster, that he had walked along the Embankment to Blackfriars, thence to Fleet Street and up Kingsway! Let the shadowers continue to the effect that he had lunched at the Long Bar in the Holborn Restaurant, and afterwards had taken a bus to Marble Arch. Let them pass on the information that he had next entered the Regal Cinema for three hours, and afterwards had gone into the Cumberland for tea. Perhaps such reports might give

Grant something to think about—but more likely something to cuss about.

Tony carried out the programme faithfully, but not with the careless unconcern that he had anticipated. He had not been in the street a minute before he convinced himself that he was being followed. The sensation deepened as he walked towards a shop in the window of which was a conveniently placed mirror. Yet, when he arrived at the mirror, and stopped, with the pretext of lighting a cigarette, the only pedestrian other than himself to be reflected was a policeman on point duty.

Following this moment of anticlimax Tony was able to persuade himself, for a time, that the sensation of being followed was nothing more than a psychological reaction to his belief that he was now regarded by the police as a suspicious person—that he was, in fact, a victim of his own guilty conscience. This sense of relief soon passed. Before long he was once again a prey to extraordinary fancies. Soon after he had entered a bus he chanced to glance in the direction of a queer little man with a bowler hat, staring eyes and a straggling ginger moustache, who had followed him into the bus. By bad luck he looked straight into the staring eyes, and was immediately convinced they belonged to a Scotland Yard man. It was a surprise when the other man alighted, leaving him still in the bus.

Two minutes later he had a similar experience. This time the pair of eyes, which he felt sure were regarding him with significant concentration, belonged to a young woman—a rather pretty young woman, indeed, who looked as if she were dressed for a theatre matinée, or perhaps a social call. True, she looked away directly he glanced in her direction, and appeared to suffer some embarrassment. True, also, that she looked utterly unlike what he imagined a female detective should look like—but was it likely that the police would employ as female detectives women who obviously looked their part? Anyway, she, too, soon got off the bus, so once more he had to feel annoyed with himself for his over-zealous imagination.

As the day had started, so it continued. Never for more than a few minutes at a time did he feel free from observation. Eyes belonging to an extraordinary medley of strange-looking people seemed to stare at him from all directions. Whenever he walked, not all the noise of London's traffic sufficed to smother the echo of following footsteps. Once, when he took a

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As the day had started, so it continued. Never for more than a few minutes at a time did he feel free from observation. Eyes belonging to an extraordinary medley of strange-looking people seemed to stare at him from all directions. Whenever he walked, not all the noise of London's traffic sufficed to smother the echo of following footsteps. Once, when he took a

taxi instead of walking, another taxi followed close behind the vehicle he was in, and only drew away and disappeared round a corner when he alighted at his destination. He *felt* that he was being persistently shadowed, yet never once did he see the same person twice, or spot a man whom his unprejudiced common sense could genuinely accept as a plain-clothes detective; nevertheless, he could not rid himself of the feeling that he was the hare to somebody else's hound.

During the three days intervening before the meeting at *Chez François* the sensation of being watched persisted, but in time Tony became accustomed to the feeling; perhaps, also, a little indifferent. That this was so was chiefly due to the unimportance of his daily routine. In that interval he did nothing out of the ordinary; nothing which he was not quite willing to have reported to Detective-Sergeant George Grant. Perhaps he was being shadowed in fact, perhaps only in his imagination. What mattered it one way or the other?

With the approach of Monday night the situation changed. On no account could he allow anyone to follow him to *Chez François*, in case it might be possible for an eavesdropper to overhear what was said over the dinner-table. All that afternoon he deliberated upon what plan to use in shaking off a shadower; if possible, without causing suspicion.

At first it was easy to invent possible plans—at least, at first glance they seemed possible, but when he began to dissect them he was, for one reason or another, compelled to discard each in turn. There was, for instance, the idea of driving to Datchet to pick up Penelope, and take her to some prearranged destination. At a convenient spot he would change seats with her, so that at the next corner she could slow the car down, he could jump out, and hide in a ditch or behind a hedge while she speeded up, and attracted the pursuing car after her.

The first objection to this suggestion was that, when Penelope ultimately arrived at her destination, her shadower would see only one person emerging from the car, instead of two, and would know at once that his real quarry had eluded him. There was one way out of this dilemma: that of having a substitute at a selected corner, ready to take his place in the car. But who was that substitute to be? Not Jerry, nor Edward, nor Stephen, of course, for they were all to be at *Chez François*. Before Tony could think of a trusted person, the question occurred to him: how was he to make his way back from the

country to town? Presently an answer occurred to him: the substitute could drive his, Tony's, car to the country, and park it somewhere convenient to the place of exchange. Then, while the substitute drove off with Penelope, Tony could drive his own car back to *Chez François*. Eventually he dismissed the plan as being complicated and unnecessary.

Then he started to make a list of shops, restaurants, bars, etc., with two exits, the idea being that he might leave by the second exit while the man who was tracking him entered by the first. This scheme, too, he passed up as being almost certain to make the shadower realize that he had been tricked. This same argument applied to his attracting his pursuer on to a bus, and then, as the bus gathered speed, to leap off again before the other man had a chance of realizing his intentions.

An hour passed. Two hours. At the end of that time he was no nearer to a solution of his problem, even though at one moment the whimsical suggestion offered itself of seeking counsel of his father! If anyone could advise him how best to shake off the police, surely Blackshirt was that man!

He glanced at his watch, and frowned. Within the next three hours he was due at *Chez François*. What a fool he was, not to have given earlier thought to the problem, he reflected with exasperation. He lit a cigarette—the eighth since he had begun to wrestle with the question—and stared into the heart of the fire.

Exactly nine minutes later the deep silence of the sitting-room was disturbed by the sound of Tony's loud chuckle. A fruity, satisfied chuckle, for which there was every good reason. If all went well . . .

CHAPTER TEN

A STONE'S-THROW FROM DOLPHIN SQUARE WAS A CONVENIENT public telephone kiosk. Thither Tony made his way, and finding it vacant, dialled TOL.

It did not take Exchange long to establish the connection.

"Penny, my love, are you doing anything tonight?"

"No, Tony, but I thought you had an engagement with——"

"So I have," he interrupted quickly. "But the question

is how to get there without our mutual friend hearing of my visit and becoming interested in the party."

"Oh!"

"I have just thought of a way to bamboozle him. With your help."

"What do you want me to do?" Even through the telephone the note of excitement in her voice was unmistakable.

"Could you hold a party at your home tonight?"

"What kind of a party?" This time her voice betrayed astonishment.

"Any kind of party you fancy. Haven't you four or five nice friends you could invite round to play ludo or tridley-winks or something of that sort?"

"If they are free, yes. Besides, just as it happens, Aunt and Uncle are going out to a bridge party tonight, so I can use their absence as an excuse?"

"Excellent. As soon as this call is finished will you ring up your friends and make the necessary arrangements? And, Penny, after seven-thirty, will you take care to answer the front door yourself, and see that all the other doors inside the house are closed?"

"Tony dear, whatever are you planning to do? Kidnap me?"

"Nothing so delightful, my love, although that's an idea for—one day. Now for the next instruction——"

"Are there more?"

"Plenty. Is your Morris in good running order?"

"Yes."

"Will you take it somewhere, and leave it there for me?"

"Where?"

"Opposite the place where I usually take you for cocktails."

"I understand, Tony," she told him crisply. "What about the key?"

"You can take it out and give it to me——"

"Then I shall see you?"

"Of course. I, too, am coming to your party."

"Tony! Then why am I to take the car——"

"I will tell you why when the time comes. Lastly, darling, is the canoe watertight?"

"It is, but really I cannot make head or tail . . . Tony, you haven't been drinking?"

"My dear child, have you ever known me drink too much?"

"Well, not *too* much," she admitted.

"Then you will do as I ask?"

"Of course I will, you old silly. But I am consumed with curiosity."

"Haven't I just promised to explain everything later? One last thing, darling——"

"What, more instructions?"

"Only one, but it is very important. Are you going to ask any men friends?"

"It wouldn't be much of a party without a man or two, my pet."

"Then take care that your asking them to a party doesn't give them ideas."

She laughed. "If you want me to carry out your *other* instructions, you must ring off now, Tony."

"I will. See you shortly, Penny."

As he left the telephone kiosk Tony chuckled to himself. If a 'tec from Scotland Yard was spying upon him from somewhere under cover, what was the betting that the man was kicking himself for not having had the opportunity of overhearing the conversation? The next moment Tony's amusement vanished completely. In the realization that Tony had a telephone installed in his own flat, and that, in any case, there were other telephones in the building which he could have used without going to the trouble of walking to an outside kiosk, the detective was almost certain to assume that the call was of such importance that he, Tony, did not want it overheard. This theory would, in all probability, result not only in the detective's requesting the telephone operator to reveal the number called, but also inform the astute Grant that Tony was aware of the possibility of his wire's being tapped, and therefore that Scotland Yard was keeping him under observation.

Tony condemned himself as a stupid fool. He had been just a little too clever and had overplayed his hand. He had dragged Penelope into prominence again, and, at the same time, had done the very thing he had been trying so energetically not to do—let Grant know that he, Tony, knew that Grant was suspicious of him.

He shrugged his shoulders. It was little use crying over spilled milk. The harm had been done; the only thing he could do was to make the best of a bad job. If he had lost some little advantage he was not much worse off than before.

Grant would go his own sweet way, regardless of Tony's knowledge, or absence of knowledge, of Scotland Yard's suspicions. As for Penelope's complicity—well, did not Grant already half suspect her?

This mood of acceptance was followed by a more cheerful thought. There might be, after all, a chance of hoodwinking Grant. If he could supply a reason for using a telephone other than his own, his call to Penelope would be of lesser significance, and Grant might still have reason to wonder—Was she an accomplice? Was she not? Was she? Was she not?

Upon re-entering his flat Tony put his new plan into immediate operation. Tracing the telephone wire back to the telephone fuse box, he unscrewed the cover and carefully broke the fuse. Then he went downstairs to one of the public telephones and reported to Exchange that his telephone was out of order. That business concluded, he went on to the garage and drove his car out.

By this time dusk was darkening the sky. Good, he thought. There was still enough light for his shadower, or shadowers—if any—to pick him up. He turned out of the Square and drove westwards at a steady pace, and kept a watchful glance upon the driving-mirror.

For some time the traffic remained too congested for him to distinguish any vehicle in particular, but presently, when the road became clearer, he noted, some way behind him, a rakish-looking dark blue car which looked as though it could be a police car. The next time he glanced in the driving-mirror this car was not in sight, but later, when he looked again, it was.

A mile, two miles, three—and still the dark blue car remained some distance behind him. Four miles, five—and it was still to be seen. By this time there were no longer any doubts left in Tony's mind about his being trailed. He chuckled. Just what the doctor ordered, he thought, as he switched on his wing lights. Far behind him the dark blue car did the same.

Twilight merged slowly into the blackness of a moonless night. Soon Tony reached quiet country roads. He switched on his headlights, not only because it made driving easier, but also on account of his wanting to encourage the detectives behind into believing that he was unaware of being trailed. Besides, the twin beams sent out a splash of light on the road, the hedges, and the trees, which made it easier for the car behind

to follow him without approaching too near. He noticed, however, that his example was not followed by the police driver. He chuckled. Evidently his trailers were not anxious for the glow of their headlights to advertise their presence in his driving-mirror.

So to Datchet, and the home of Penelope's aunt and uncle. The home, too, of his grandmother, Countess Redbrook, Tony thought sadly, as he passed by the gates of the drive which led to the quaint old Elizabethan house.

Outside *Riverbend* two cars were already parked, apparently for the evening. He grinned. Good old Penny! She hadn't let the grass grow under her feet! He manoeuvred his car behind the other two, switched off the engine and his headlights, and went to the front door. As he approached he heard the sound of dance music. Lucky devils, he thought enviously. What wouldn't he give to be dancing with Penny again!

He knocked loudly on the door so as to be heard above the music. Evidently Penelope was on the lookout for him, for she opened the door almost immediately.

"Hullo, Tony," she greeted breathlessly.

He stepped into the hall, closed the door behind him, then saw that all other doors likewise were shut.

"What have you managed, Penny?"

"Everything you requested. The canoe is tied up beneath the willow. The car is opposite *The Swan*—here is the key before I forget—and, as you can hear for yourself, the party already is in full swing."

"Thanks a million, Penny darling."

"Now please tell me what all the mystery is about. You are not up to anything mad, are you, Tony, that you haven't dared to mention to me?"

"Nothing like that, my love. All this rigmarole is for the purpose—I hope!—of pulling the wool over the eyes of the Scotland Yard johnnies, and so prevent their knowing anything of the meeting tonight."

"Then you are being shadowed?"

"I certainly am. I don't know to what extent, mind you, but I do know that a car followed me all the way here from Dolphin Square."

"Oh, Tony!"

"Don't worry, Penny dear. As far as the bulldogs outside are concerned I have come here to join your party, and here

I am going to remain until—what time do you propose breaking it up, by the by?"

"About midnight."

"That will suit me fine. My trailers have seen me come in here, they will hear the sound of the music, and, if you are clever, they will see shadows on the curtains of dancing couples. They might also hear you come out in front for a breath of fresh air, and call out something to Tony——"

She interrupted with a satisfied, cooing laugh. "Leave that part of the business to me."

"And lastly, Penny, with any luck I shall be seen leaving this house, just before, or perhaps just after, your other guests. Surely nobody with savvy will doubt that I have spent the entire evening here? In fact, however, I am going to use your car to make the journey to town and back. If I should get back in time I shall join your fellow merry-makers, and claim the rest of the dances in lieu of those I miss in the earlier part of the evening. Meanwhile, it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to warn the others of my possible appearance."

"I will," she promised quickly.

"Tell them they are to have the pleasure of seeing your future husband——"

"I shall say nothing of the sort." She glanced at the grandfather clock and gave him a little push. "You must go now, Tony."

Nothing more had been said concerning the canoe, but having heard part explanation Penelope's alert brain had needed no prompting as to his reason for wanting it. Automatically she led the way through the house to a door which opened out on to a loggia overlooking a small stretch of smooth lawn, and beyond, the placid river.

"Good luck, Tony darling," she whispered, as he stepped off the loggia and disappeared into the surrounding darkness.

Tony knew the gardens surrounding *Riverbend* almost as well as his own flat in Dolphin Square; he found no difficulty in making his way to the willow tree, nor in finding the canoe beneath. He climbed into the canoe, untied the painter, and gently paddled downstream.

The experience was a weird, though not an unbeautiful, one, canoeing along on a river of ink through the overclouded blackness of the night. He could see nothing of the water except where it quivered into narrow paths of light reflected from an

occasional upper window of one of the riverside houses. Nor could he see the river banks. What was visible were the lighted windows of the houses; some aglow with cheerful colour—green, yellow, pink, according to the shade of the curtains drawn across them—some streaming with naked light, some revealing only chinks or narrow beams of light.

Fortunately Penelope and he had often boated down this stretch of water during the summer months, so he knew it well enough to identify his whereabouts by the dark shapes of the houses. Soon he saw the outline of *The Swan*, so he turned the bows of the canoe towards the inn, and presently felt them bump gently against the small landing-stage, which had been built by the owners of *The Swan* many years previously.

He landed, attached the canoe to a stump in a nearby private garden, where it was not likely to be accidentally seen, and crossed to an acre of rough ground which had been converted into a parking-place. In the summertime the park was apt to be filled, but in other seasons it was used only by motorists visiting *The Swan*, which had the reputation of being one of the jolliest of all the riverside inns. Half a dozen cars were in the park, Penelope's among them. He entered it, switched on the engine, and headed for town.

II

Outside *Riverbend* a Scotland Yard man stared disconsolately at a lighted window, from which came the tempting music of a slow waltz. The curtains were only partly drawn; through the gap he saw the silhouettes of dancing couples, passing and repassing. . . .

"Blimey!" he thought. "There's a party on. My man may be there for hours. Just my blooming luck!"

III

Tony reached *Chez François* seven minutes before the appointed time, but he found Jerry already there. Both Jerry's face and voice were serious as he greeted his friend.

"I came here early, hoping to have a chat with you before the others came. Tony, what mischief have you been up to?"

Tony grinned. "What makes you think I have been in mischief?"

"For one thing, because it isn't in your nature to keep out of it, if there is any chance of your doing otherwise, but chiefly because of your attitude on the telephone the other day."

"And what did you deduce from it, Mr. Sherlock Holmes?"

"If the theory were not too fantastic to be true, I should have said that your line was being tapped."

"That particular theory may be perfectly true," Tony cheerfully assured Jerry.

"Good lord!" Jerry stared at his friend. "By whom?"

"The police."

"Tony! What the devil have you been up to? The police!" Jerry shook his head incredulously. "You are pulling my leg."

"I am not."

"Then I am damned if I understand! If the police are tapping your telephone line, that must mean that you have committed a—a crime—— What the hell! I won't believe that of you, Tony. You are not capable of committing a crime. You are up to one of your pranks——"

Before Tony could reply there was a pounding on the panels of the door, which was thrown open with a crash to reveal the excited faces of Edward and Stephen.

"I'll tell you everything in a minute," Tony promised quickly. He raised his voice. "Whatcher, Stephen! Whatcher, Edward!"

For some minutes conversation was general; although they had all met two weeks previously, and were due to meet again in another two weeks, each one had plenty to ask the other three. Besides, there were drinks to be prepared, and the latest 'stories' to be heard from Stephen and Edward. When it came to the latest stories, there was keen rivalry between the two men, for Stephen, working in the City as a chartered accountant, had the Stock Exchange for his source, while Edward, working on the editorial staff of a popular monthly magazine, had Fleet Street. It was not easy to decide which source produced the better—or the worse!—stories!

Presently Stephen turned to Tony: "By the way, old cock, what's the idea of holding an extraordinary meeting? What's in the wind?"

"What about eating first?"

"That's okay by me. I am as hungry as a hunter." Stephen

led the way towards the round table which stood in the middle of the small room. "I'll ring down and let François know that we are ready."

An hour passed, during which the four men enjoyed one of François's special meals. François had a soft spot for the ex-R.A.F. fliers, and personally superintended the preparation of all dishes served to the O-Sixers. At last, however, Gaston, having cleared the table, and served coffee and liqueurs, asked if the messieurs required anything else before he departed downstairs.

"No, thanks, Gaston. We will ring if we want anything."

"*Très bien, messieurs.*"

As soon as Gaston was out of the way Edward turned to Tony. "Out with it, Tony. What's in the wind?"

Tony glanced round at the three eager faces. "Adventure!" he said succinctly.

"Adventure my eye!" Edward returned rudely. "There ain't nothing like that left in the world since the war came to an end—except in the pages of those lousy magazines which, for my sins, I have to help edit."

A strange expression appeared in Jerry's eyes. "Adventure!" he repeated quietly. "That word has many meanings, Tony."

Stephen said nothing, but a happy smile of anticipation spread across his brown, freckled face.

"Do you chaps remember the meal we had here to celebrate Armistice?"

Edward grinned. "You mean the meal we didn't have. Unless my memory is faulty, you dragged us off to Datchet before we had a chance of eating. By George! Was that a night? I have dreamed about it ever since. I have never made a better flying tackle than when I brought that wrestler fellow down—what was his name?" Edward paused abruptly, but not for long. "Why are you reviving that happy memory, Tony?"

"Something tells me that Tony wants to involve us in another doings," Stephen burbled beatifically.

"Do you?" Jerry asked Tony.

"Perhaps."

"You lucky devil!" Stephen exclaimed enviously. "How do you find 'em so easily?"

"I don't find 'em. I make 'em," Tony blurted out unthinkingly.

This surprising announcement shocked the others into temporary silence, while they stared at Tony with speculative eyes.

"You *what*?" Edward gasped at last.

Jerry became unexpectedly suspicious. "Have you been holding out on us, Tony? You speak as though there have been other occasions."

The question disconcerted Tony. "I—I—well, you see . . ." His faltering explanation tailed off.

"Have you?" Stephen demanded severely. "Have you been poking your nose into other people's business during the past twelve months without letting us into the secret?"

Tony gazed at each man in turn, but not one pair of eyes offered him any sympathy. All three pairs were reproachful, accusing.

"Yes," he admitted.

"Can you sit there calmly and admit that you have been having a darned fine time messing about with some, more of those rotten crooks while the rest of us have been bored silly adding up columns of figures, editing tripe for a woman's magazine, or flying a blinking air liner to Paris and back?"

"I am afraid so," Tony admitted, shamefaced.

"Of all the low-down, selfish tricks——" Stephen began indignantly. "And you call yourself a friend!"

Jerry asked quietly: "Why did you keep mum, Tony?"

"Because I didn't want to drag you chaps into trouble."

"Trouble! Trouble!" Edward's voice rose. "Do you hear that, you chaps? He didn't want to drag us into trouble, when all this time we would have given our funny-bones for something to kick us out of the rut into which we have all fallen—I mean we three," he explained heavily, indicating Jerry and Stephen.

"Of course, if you are as keen as all that to go to jail——" Tony said lightly.

Once again his words caused consternation.

"For the love of Mike! You haven't turned crook yourself?" Stephen gasped.

Tony grinned. "Not yet. But what I have been doing has made me rather unpopular with Scotland Yard."

"The devil it has!"

"Perhaps I had better begin at the beginning——" Tony suggested.

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," Jerry agreed drily.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THERE WAS JOY IN THE HEARTS OF THE O-SIXERS BY THE TIME Tony had told his story and had invoked their aid. This they eagerly promised, and before the meeting broke up for the night a 'duty' roster had been drawn up so as to ensure that no evening passed by without there being one of the three men in the vicinity of *Three Ways*, ready to follow Xavier Wyllson wherever he might go.

Arrangements were also argued out and agreed as to the method of communicating with Tony without themselves incurring suspicion and being placed under observation. One such arrangement was that, at a set time each day, Tony should go to a call-box (a different one each day) and ring through to another call-box (also to be changed from day to day), where the call was to be awaited by whichever of them had been on duty the night before. For this purpose Edward volunteered to search for and supply a list of convenient call-boxes with their numbers, to be used on specified days.

It was further agreed that they should forgather at *Chez François* on their usual night, in two weeks' time. As Jerry pointed out, in answer to Tony's argument that it might bring the others under suspicion—suppose that a Scotland Yard man did follow Tony to the restaurant, no harm could possibly come of any subsequent enquiries. Had they not all served in the same squadron? Had they not met every month at *Chez François* since the end of the war? There was no reason whatever for Scotland Yard to assume that the meetings were anything other than what they had always been—innocent reunions of ex-R.A.F. flyers.

As soon as the four men were satisfied that they had provided for every immediate eventuality, they parted, and went their separate ways. Tony returned to Datchet, parked the car near *The Swan*, paddled the canoe back to *Riverbend*, and entered the house by way of the loggia door. The party was still in progress, so he went in, claiming that he had found the front door open, and had walked in without knocking. Then he apologized for his late arrival.

His story aroused no suspicions among the five guests: Penelope had earlier informed them that she was expecting Tony. Besides, two of the three men present, and also one of the girls, had previously met him. For the next thirty minutes dancing was continued to gramophone music. Then someone suggested that it was time for them to return to their homes. They left the house in a party, but outside, separated, to enter their respective cars. Soon five cars were scattering; three to local destinations, two in the direction of town.

In the police car the detective who had spent a cold and miserable evening keeping an eye upon the happy people at *Riverbend* yawned off his fatigue and boredom and wondered whether the way of the transgressor was quite as bad as it was painted. For himself, he would willingly have changed places with the man he had been keeping under observation.

II

One day Superintendent Stevens asked Detective-Sergeant Grant: "By the way, is there anything fresh on that young man Anthony Verrell, whom you suspect of being the instigator of the 'punishment crimes' you are investigating?"

"No, sir. We have kept him under observation ever since the day he toured the Leatherhead neighbourhood. In that time he has led the ordinary normal life one would expect a young fellow to lead. He goes to law lectures during the day, and sometimes studies during the evening. On other evenings he has twice visited a cinema, twice visited his parents, once spent the evening dancing at the home of the girl Penelope——"

"The one living at Datchet?"

"Yes, sir. And once he has visited an ex-R.A.F. friend of his, name of Osborne, for the purpose of playing billiards."

"Have you investigated young Verrell?"

"I have, sir." Grant shrugged his shoulders. "Apart from possessing a reputation for restrained recklessness, and a desire always to have a hand in anything promising thrills and adventure, his record hasn't a suspicion of a blot upon it."

"And the girl?"

"The same remarks apply, more or less, to her. She lives with an uncle who is a solicitor, with a rich practice in the City. He is a dry old stick, but there cannot be more than half a dozen solicitors who wouldn't willingly exchange practices with him."

Stevens smiled drily. "I didn't think you would find anything against the uncle, Grant. I have run into him several times in the Courts. I suppose you are quite sure you are right in concentrating your attention upon young Verrell? The Assistant Commissioner will not allow you unlimited time for what might be no more than a wild-goose chase—I mean, so far as Verrell is concerned."

"I admit that there are times when I have doubts about him," Grant said moodily. "But if he is not guilty I cannot think of any likely explanation to account for him trying to find out all he could about Mr. Wylson."

"Speaking of Wylson, have you also investigated him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any reason for anyone's wanting to punish him?"

"I have not been able to discover one."

Stevens shook his head doubtfully. "In that case I am not sure that you are justified in wasting any more time on Verrell."

"There is one other point——"

"Well?"

"Between twelve and two each day Verrell visits a public telephone call-box and makes a call—always to another public call-box."

The Superintendent looked interested. "Have you been able to listen-in to any of those calls?"

"No, sir. By the time our man has been able to report to Exchange and ask for the line to be tapped the conversation has finished."

"Haven't you been able to arrange for the line to be tapped beforehand?"

"No, sir, because Verrell never goes to the same call-box twice. Nor, for that matter, to a call-box in the same Exchange. Yesterday he went to a Holborn number; the day before to a Temple Bar number; the day before that to a Chancery number; the day before that to a Regent number. And so on, sir."

"Humph! That is rather a strange procedure. What do you make of it, Grant?"

"That he suspects himself of being under observation, and is taking precautions that his telephone conversations shall not be overheard. In that case, he must have a guilty conscience about something or other, otherwise he would not worry about being overheard."

"It does seem that that young man's activities are not entirely above suspicion. Continue to keep him under observation, and report to me in three days' time."

"Yes, sir."

Stevens frowned. "And continue to investigate Xavier Wylson. It might be as well if we, too, knew why he is being selected for punishment," he finished in a musing voice, as he walked down the passage.

III

Tony's three friends faithfully carried out the duties for which they had so eagerly volunteered. Every night one or another went out to Leatherhead in his car, and parked at a convenient spot from which the gates at *Three Ways* could be seen. Every night their wearisome vigil was in vain. No car passed through the gates, either entering or leaving.

One morning Edward was very disconsolate on the telephone. "If you hadn't seen him at the night-club with your own eyes, Tony, I should believe the silly blighter was a hermit, or an anchorite, or whatever you call those fellows who shut themselves off from the world. Dammit! old son, what does he do with himself every night? Fancy having a darn' lovely girl in love with you, and not going to see her from one month to the next! If she is all you say, you would find me taking her out to a dance every other blooming night."

"Perhaps Wylson hasn't that much energy."

"Then what's wrong with the pictures? At least, he could hold her hand. And why doesn't she visit him occasionally? Do you think they do all their love-making by correspondence?"

"Are you losing patience, Edward?"

"I suppose I am to some extent. I like action, and plenty of it. Lordy! I always thought a detective's life wasn't so bad, but those fellows can keep their jobs as far as I am concerned. I should rather be a six-day bicycle racer."

Wylson's behaviour puzzled Tony. Even if the other man did not care overmuch for the social life which usually accompanies the possession of wealth, it seemed somewhat unnatural for him to remain at home night after night, never visiting, never receiving.

However, three mornings after this conversation with

Edward, Tony read an interesting paragraph in the *Daily Telegraph*. It was short, but to the effect that Xavier Wylson was among the guests present at a dinner party held the night before, in celebration of the coming of age of the Hon. Dorothy Furst.

Jerry had been on duty the previous night, so Tony anxiously awaited the hour fixed for telephoning Jerry. With any luck, the mysterious Drusilla also had been invited to the affair, in which case it was quite possible that Wylson had accompanied her on the journey.

In due course he got through to the number which Edward had chosen for that day.

"Jerry?"

"Yes, Tony."

"So there was action at last. Did you have any luck?"

"Luck! No, Tony, why should I?"

"Don't say you lost him?"

"Lost him! No. Why should I have done so? He remained at home, as usual."

Tony's voice became husky from disappointment. "Are you sure?"

"Positively. Not a vehicle of any sort passed through the gates, Tony. All that happened was that two men came out and wandered off in the direction of the *Plough and Horses*. Probably they remained there until closing-time, for they returned shortly afterwards."

"Have you read the *Daily Telegraph* this morning?"

"Not properly, but I have a copy of it here. Why?"

"Read the third paragraph of London Day by Day."

"Hold the line a minute."

Jerry was not long in reading the paragraph. "I don't understand what can have happened," he exclaimed excitedly. "What do you make of the report, Tony? Do you think that Peterborough fellow made a mistake?"

"I doubt it. He says he spoke to Wylson."

"He couldn't have. And yet . . . I am going to look farther into this business. I am not doing anything special tonight. I am going back to *Three Ways* again tonight. I have an idea."

"Stephen will be there tonight——"

"There is no need to say anything to him," Jerry interrupted quickly. "If he should know I was about his attention might

be distracted. Will you ring me tomorrow night about ten, at the emergency number?"

Tony promised to do this, and rang off.

The following morning he rang Stephen, only to hear a repetition of the now familiar story. Nothing of any consequence had occurred between the hours of 7.42, at which time Stephen had begun his watch, and 10.45, when he had given up and gone home.

In the evening Tony got through to the emergency number, a public call-box near Cheam station—Jerry lived, with his parents, in the Cheam district.

"Hullo, Tony," Jerry greeted, directly he recognized Tony's voice. "My hunch was a good one. Peterborough didn't make any mistake about reporting Wylson's presence at the coming-of-age party."

"How did he get there without your spotting him?"

"Quite easily! The darned house has three entrances in all, each of them from a different road."

"Three Ways!" Tony exclaimed.

"Exactly! We have been a quartet of blind fools for not realizing before the meaning of the name. Wylson uses whichever road is nearest to his destination, and it so happens that the entrance we have been watching is the one nearest to the coast. For all we know, he may have been out every night we have been on watch."

"Well, I'll be damned! Where are the other two entrances, Jerry?"

"Do you remember the narrow road about a mile this side of the main entrance?"

"That cart-track by the side of the *Windmill Inn*?"

"That's the one—it is called Windmill Lane, by the by. One of the other two entrances is along that lane, about half a mile on the right, going east. The third entrance is on a secondary road, leading to Betchworth. I shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't use the last-mentioned entrance the most; it is the nearest to London."

"What do you think would be our best plan, Jerry? Watch the Betchworth road entrance in future?"

"I think so."

Tony laughed shortly. "If we do, it is ten to one that he will use one of the other two gates."

"The odds are only two to one," Jerry corrected consolingly.

IV

It was heartbreaking for the other two men to realize that all the boring evenings they had spent in watching the wrong gates had been wasted, but they were good sports, and they both insisted upon carrying on. Despite their generosity, however, the night came round for the O-Sixers to meet as usual, and still none of them had seen Wylson leaving *Three Ways*. At Tony's insistence they all met, and left *Three Ways* unwatched for once—as Tony pointed out, the time element was not a vital part of his plans to deal with Wylson.

That Monday evening was even jollier than usual, for there were experiences to be swapped, information to be exchanged, and matters to be discussed. The conspiracy against Wylson—if it could be called such—seemed to add a zest to their meeting, and brought laughter to their lips even more readily than usual.

The following night Stephen went out to Leatherhead; on Wednesday night, Edward; on Thursday night, Jerry; on Friday night, Stephen. On Saturday morning, when Tony 'phoned to learn whether there was anything to report, his ear was almost deafened by Stephen's shout.

"I've found her, old cock!" he yelled. "I have found the girl you are after!"

"Good man!" Tony exclaimed wholeheartedly. "Who is she?"

"Is she slim and willowy like an ear of corn swaying in the summer breeze; is she like the perfume of spring violets nestling in a wooded dell; is she sweet and fresh like a soft wind blowing in from the sea——"

"That's our bird," Tony interrupted rudely. "But what is her name, and where does she live?"

Still Stephen did not reply to his question. "Let me tell you what happened," he burred on. "About eight-thirty a car swished out of *Three Ways* and turned to the right——"

"Towards Betchworth?"

"Yes. Of course, I had to be parked on the London side, so I couldn't see whether it was Wylson's car or not. I took a chance that it was, and dashed off after it until I could get a glimpse of its registration number. When I saw by the number that it was the car you had followed I fell back, and at the first cross-roads I pretended to turn off."

"Good for you," Tony congratulated.

"As soon as the Rolls was out of sight I turned, and hurried after it until I could just see its tail-light again. I kept roughly at that distance until the end of the journey."

"Where was that?"

Stephen did not intend to have his story spoiled. "The Rolls carried on until it reached the Guildford-Reigate-Sevenoaks road. There it turned off on to the main road and made for Reigate. Just short of Reigate it came to a temporary halt, and then backed into a secondary road. Two hundred yards farther on it came to a stop." So did Stephen.

"Well?" Tony prompted impatiently.

"Fortunately it was a moonlight night, so I was able to leave my car on the main road, hide behind a tree, and see all that happened."

"What did happen?"

"For some time nothing. Nobody got in or out of the car. Just when I was wondering whether Wylson had become soft-headed, a small gate, let into the hedge, opened, and a girl appeared. She made straight for the Rolls, and got inside. Then the Rolls moved off back to the main road, turned right, and made for Reigate. I followed. In Reigate the Rolls turned off on to the Brighton road until it reached a roadhouse with the blooming silly name of the Eyrie——"

"I know the place, Stephen. I understand its reputation is not too savoury. Apparently it lives up to its name."

"Eyrie! I don't get it!"

"An eyrie is the nest of a predatory bird, old son."

"Oh ho!" Stephen chuckled. "That explains the nice pieces of stuff I saw floating around. Though, to give the place its due, the part I saw looked innocuous."

"Did you go in?"

"You bet I did. Wylson and the girl went in, so I didn't see why I shouldn't do the same. That is when I saw that she was a sheaf of corn——"

"You've said all that once."

"Tony, you have no soul in your carcass, no poetry in your heart, and, for that matter, no eyes in your head to recognize a glorious girl when you see one——"

"All right, all right. She is all you say she is, Stephen. But what happened at the Eyrie?"

"Wylson and Drusilla danced for a couple of hours. That is all."

"And then?"

"The Rolls drove back to the side gate, Drusilla left the car and disappeared somewhere behind the hedge, and the Rolls drove off. I didn't trouble to follow because I concluded it was probably returning to *Three Ways*."

"What did you do?"

"Went home, had a few hours' sleep—and dreamed that Drusilla danced with me instead of that hungry-faced swine of a Wylson—and returned to the neighbourhood of Reigate at cockcrow."

"What on earth for?"

"To see if I could bump into y^e olde village postman. And I did. And I asked the old boy a few discreet questions. And he answered them. And I found out that the small gate from which Drusilla had appeared the previous night was the tradesmen's entrance to a middling-sized house which I wouldn't mind owning if it were given to me, with the necessary income for its upkeep."

"But did you discover the girl's identity?" the exasperated Tony barked.

Stephen chuckled loudly. "Yes, old cock, I did. And do you know who our fair Drusilla is? None other than Pamela, one and only child of our one and only Tweedale Hanshew."

"Good lord!"

Tony's amazement was justified, for Tweedale Hanshew was the most righteous, and the 'rightest', of 'right' politicians.

He was also Home Secretary.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"PAMELA HANSHEW!" PENELOPE REPEATED THE NAME MUSINGLY.

"Is she anyone in particular?"

"Yes, my love. Daughter of our Home Secretary, Tweedale Hanshew."

"Tony!" Enlightenment vitalized her features. "Now we know why Wylson kept her name secret, and prevented her photographs from appearing in the press. Of course, her father was not aware that she was in the habit of frequenting night-clubs?"

"You bet he wasn't, Penny. Considering the campaign he has been waging for years against night-clubs, public-houses, road-houses, and the like, I think the old boy would have a fit if he were ever to hear that his own daughter was one of the offenders against whom he rampages in the House." Tony laughed. "Can't you picture the scene? Hanshew spouting for all he is worth against the vicious and demoralizing atmosphere of the night-club, and one of the Opposition shouting out: 'Why doesn't Pamela share the Hon. Member's views?' Why, his campaign would collapse like a pricked bubble if ever the information about Pamela were to leak out."

Penelope looked severe. "For the sweet, innocent maiden you believe her to be, I think Pamela is a mean little cat, to compromise her father's political career for the sake of her own recreation."

"Come, darling, you must admit old Hanshew lays it on too thick about night-clubs in general. Some of them may not be all that could be desired, but others are not so bad. What is wrong with La Belle Lorraine, for instance?"

"Nothing, Tony, so far as we know. That is not the point. As long as Pamela remains under her father's roof she should be loyal to her father's opinions, in deed if not in thought. No wonder she took the precaution of slipping out of the tradesmen's entrance. Evidently she did not mean to take any risk of being seen."

"I still think you are being too hard upon her," Tony protested. "After all, she is little more than a kid, while Wylson is a grown man. I'll bet a fiver that it was he who persuaded her to visit the night-club."

"Of course," Penelope agreed sweetly, "Pamela could not possibly be to blame." Her voice became cross. "Nonsense, Tony. Wylson could not have persuaded her to accompany him to a night-club unless she were willing."

"At any rate, I am sure of one thing. If Pamela could have had even the vaguest suspicion that Wylson is Jason, she would not have spoken to him, still less have gone out dancing with him."

"Why should Pamela, particularly, be prejudiced against Jason?"

"Because Hanshew and Jason are in bitter opposition. Within legal limits Jason has accused the Home Secretary of being the working man's worst enemy. Jason's pamphlets have made

Hanshew the most unpopular man in Britain. He is not really liked by members of his own party."

"I hate politics!" Penelope exclaimed warmly. "Politics bring out the worst in men. But why is Hanshew disliked by his own party, and why, in spite of that dislike, has he been Home Secretary for so long?"

"Members of his own party dislike him for his puritanical views, Penny. Besides abominating night-clubs and their like, he is also against any form of gambling—if he had his way, there would be no horse- or dog-racing—the playing of sport, the opening of cinemas on a Sunday, all forms of hunting, and, indeed, any of the lighter forms of entertainment which help to make life easier for the average man. His idea of life on earth is that it should be one of unremitting toil and sacrifice; no more than a preparation for the next, and better, world.

"On the other hand, all those opinions he keeps to himself; he does not force them down the throats of others. His own reputation is unbelievably spotless; his energy amazing; his aptitude for ministerial duties unsurpassed. In short, he is the best Home Secretary the country has had for generations, even though he is a 'right' die-hard. That is why his own party put up with his foibles."

Penelope shook her head as though puzzled. "In many ways Wylson and Hanshew have similar tastes. Wylson does not smoke, does not drink, does not swear, does not gamble. Except for an innocuous partiality for dancing on the part of Wylson, the two men should make better companions than enemies. If Wylson is in love with Pamela, why does he not marry her?"

"I cannot say for certain, Penny. Perhaps he believes that, if he were married to Pamela, she might discover the secret of Jason's identity, and betray the fact to her father."

"Hanshew could not hurt Wylson even if that secret were known to him."

"Not directly, but ridicule might spoil Wylson's prospects of future power more than the martyrdom of being legally punished by the existing regime. And ridicule on Hanshew's lips would be an effective weapon. Besides, Wylson's marriage to the daughter of a man so notably 'right' possibly would not commend itself to Jason's followers."

"What are you going to do next, Tony, now that you know the identity of Drusilla?"

"What you should have said, Penny darling, was—what are *we* going to do next?"

"We?"

"I need your assistance again."

Penelope's eyes reflected her happiness. "Doing what, Tony?"

"We are going to make our first move against Wylson by calling on Pamela Hanshew. I wonder if she will ever want to see Wylson again when she learns that he is her father's bitterest enemy?"

She placed the tips of her fingers lightly on his hand. "Tony dear, please do not think me a pessimist, but are you quite sure that your suggested move is a good one?"

"Why shouldn't it be? Don't you think it is?"

"I am not sure that it will prove successful."

"Why not?"

She smiled wistfully. "I do not think you quite appreciate the quality of a woman's love."

He chuckled. "If I don't, it is because I have not had the opportunity of finding out for myself," he said pointedly.

Penelope decided that it was time to change the conversation.

II

Two days later Penelope and Tony drove out to Furzehill, Hanshew's home—followed, at a discreet distance, by a police car. The entrance to Furzehill, they found, faced the main road, and not the side road, along which the Rolls had waited.

The door was opened by a trim maid, who gazed enquiringly from one visitor to the other.

"Miss Hanshew," Tony said quietly.

"I will find out whether Miss Hanshew is at home. Will you kindly step into this room?" The visitors did so. "What name shall I announce, sir?"

"Merely say two friends."

The girl looked first blank and then doubtful. "I am sorry, sir, but we have had instructions from Mr. Hanshew not to admit anyone who refuses to give a name. You see, sir, Mr. Hanshew being a Member of Parliament, sometimes all sorts of queer people try to get to see him—not that I mean anything disrespectful, sir—"

"We quite understand. Nevertheless, will you please repeat what we have already said?"

The maid became even more embarrassed, but she did not move. "I am sorry, sir," she said uneasily. "If I am to announce you I must be told your name."

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "You may say we are friends. If you refuse to do as we ask, I can only add that Miss Hanshew will not be pleased to hear of that fact when next we meet."

"Oh! You really *are* friends," the girl exclaimed in a relieved voice, and looked cheerful again. "That is different. If you will wait here, sir, I will find out whether Miss Hanshew is at home."

Presently she reappeared. "Miss Hanshew will be with you in a few moments, sir."

In actual fact Pamela appeared just one minute later. She entered the room, puzzled and angry.

"Agnes brought me a strange message." She glanced from Tony to Penelope, then back to Tony again. "You are not friends of mine," she accused. "I do not recollect having seen you before."

"Nevertheless, we are your friends. Perhaps you will allow me to explain——"

For a moment Pamela appeared to contemplate a refusal. Watching the sequence of expressions which crossed the open, healthy countenance, Penelope had to admit to herself that Tony's—and Stephen's—favourable reactions towards the Home Secretary's daughter appeared justified. She looked so essentially fresh, and charming, and feminine (Penelope was too modest to realize that she herself was just as fresh, just as charming, just as feminine) that it became harder to believe that she had deceived her father from any motive other than sheer joy of life, and a reasonable desire to enjoy innocent recreation. At the moment, however, her cheeks were flushed with displeasure; her eyes sparkled for the same reason; her dainty little chin was firm and defiant. Penelope admired her immensely for her attitude, and smiled.

Perhaps that smile influenced Pamela, for unexpectedly she answered Tony.

"Very well, I will listen," she agreed coldly. "Will you sit down?" She herself set an example, which Penelope and Tony followed.

"Miss Hanshew, may I begin by asking you whether you study politics?"

She smiled for the first time. "I leave party politics for Father to grapple with; personally, I cannot understand why we should not be governed by the best men for the task, irrespective of which party they belong to."

"That is much too rational a suggestion to suit the male mentality," Penelope slipped in quickly.

Tony frowned severely, and Penelope giggled to herself. He had brought her with him to be an ally, not an adversary.

"But you cannot be unaware of the fact that your father has political enemies."

Pamela shook her head. "Opponents, but not enemies."

"I am sorry, Miss Hanshew, but I must repeat the word, enemies. Enemies who would be only too pleased to have an opportunity of intriguing against him for the purpose of supplanting him."

She looked a little distressed. "Well?"

"What would you think of a man who made use of a family scandal to ruin another man's political career?"

"I should despise him," she replied hotly. "But what has all this to do with my father?"

"This, Miss Hanshew. A certain enemy of your father is in possession of information which could be used against your father with damning effect."

Pamela's eyes began to sparkle again. "Really, sir, your words are intolerable! How dare you hint that there is a scandal in my father's life! His life is blameless. Everybody in the world knows that."

"Your father's life may be blameless, Miss Hanshew, but what of yours?"

For a moment there was silence in the room. Then Pamela rose to her feet. "I will not listen to another word!" she cried out passionately. "I must ask you to leave this house immediately."

"Please——"

"I refuse to listen. I do not know what your object is in coming here with such a fantastic story, but I will not listen to another word of it. How dare you insult me in my own home!"

"I am not insulting you——"

"You have suggested that my life is not above reproach."

"Your father might think your life not above reproach if

he were informed that you are in the habit of dancing at night-clubs."

Once again a painful silence. Pamela looked pitifully hurt, like a child unjustly struck. Penelope felt sorry for the Home Secretary's daughter.

Pamela sat down. "Who are you?" she asked in an anguished voice. "What are you? A spy?"

"I am no spy, but I happen to be a member of Maurice's club, La Belle Lorraine."

"Oh!" Suddenly her attitude changed. She glanced at Tony pleadingly. "Then you know I have done no harm in visiting there. I adore dancing. I love London, music, people

"Of course I know you have done no harm in dancing at Maurice's club, Miss Hanshew, but what do you think would happen if your father should ever ask the House of Commons for more powers against night-clubs, and one of the Opposition party were to rise to his feet and accuse the Home Secretary of hypocrisy, because his daughter was an enthusiastic supporter of night-clubs—and road-houses!"

"Dear lord!" Her cheeks paled. "No Member could be as vile as that!"

"I should not place too much faith in the decency of every Member of Parliament," Tony commented drily. "There is one black sheep in most large flocks."

"I only wanted to enjoy myself," she murmured. "It is so dull here when Father is at the House. I never dreamed that I was doing anything which might be used against him."

Tony looked triumphantly at Penelope, but she carefully avoided his glance, so he turned back once more to Pamela.

"Will you believe me, Miss Hanshew, when I say I was sure that you had no intention wilfully of doing anything which might ruin your father's career? You acted in all innocence, but the same cannot be said of your companion. He knew the risk you were taking."

Pamela reacted immediately to the introduction of Wylson into the conversation. The light of anger began to gleam in her eyes.

"What are you inferring?" she asked sharply.

"As a man of the world, Xavier Wylson had no right to ask you to compromise yourself with your father, or your father, indirectly, with his political supporters.

She rose from her chair again. "Your impertinence is intolerable. How dare you come here, in my father's absence, and insult me——"

"I have not insulted you, Miss Hanshew; nor have I any desire to do so," he interrupted.

"In insulting my friends, you are insulting me," she claimed loyally.

"Can you be sure that Xavier Wylson is your friend?"

"Oh!" Angry tears misted her eyes. "I will not put up with any more. Will you leave this house voluntarily, or must I send for help to evict you?"

"We will leave voluntarily if you will do us one favour, Miss Hanshew."

She stared scornfully at Tony. "I will have nothing more to do with you; I did wrong in consenting even to speak to two anonymous people who have not the courage to reveal their names."

The accusation stung him. "If you will give me your word not to reveal my name to any other person, I shall be glad to tell you."

"I shall not give that promise. I shall report this visit to Mr. Wylson; no doubt he will be interested to hear of your attempt to vilify him."

"Will you make a similar report to your father?"

The question disconcerted her. She looked away; twin red spots burned high in her cheeks. "That is my business."

Tony was not too satisfied with the progress of the interview. He glanced despairingly at Penelope, whose lips parted in a mischievous smile. Apparently she interpreted this expression as a signal of distress, for she said gently, but unexpectedly:

"If you will not do as we ask for your own sake, Miss Hanshew, will you do so for your father's?"

Pamela turned to face Penelope. "Are you trying to trick me?"

Penelope ignored the question. "Have you ever heard your father speak of a man named Jason?"

After slight hesitation Pamela replied with a curt: "No."

"Do you remember the fable of Jason sowing dragons' teeth?"

"I do, but what has Greek mythology to do with my father?"

"Because a modern, twentieth-century Jason is sowing dragons' teeth which might grow up to be destroyers of everything for which your father's long political life has stood."

Pamela's expression became puzzled and uncertain, and thereby presented an opportunity of which Penelope was quick to take advantage. Rising from her chair, she moved across the room to Tony.

"Give me the pamphlet, Tony."

Tony took a pamphlet from his pocket and gave it to her; she passed it on to the other girl.

"Read that," she ordered imperiously.

Pamela Hanshew began to read; her changing expressions betrayed the effect which the cunningly worded pamphlet had upon her. Initial distrust gave way to surprise, surprise to indignation, indignation to alarm and distress.

"Do you understand the significance of that pamphlet, Miss Hanshew?" Penelope demanded as soon as it became obvious that Pamela had finished reading.

"Of course I do," Pamela replied. "This is a wicked, scurrilous attack upon the Government, and upon my father in particular. Where did it come from? Why was it printed? Oh! It's horrible, horrible! Why haven't the police arrested the man who wrote it?"

"The police would be very glad to arrest Jason, but there are reasons why they cannot do so. In the first place, for all their efforts, we happen to know that they have failed to establish the identity of Jason. Secondly, even were they to know who Jason is, they would not arrest him, because they could neither make, nor substantiate, any charge against him."

"Libel—sedition——"

Penelope shook her head. "Although at first reading that pamphlet seems both libellous and seditious, it is neither, as a closer study will convince you. Believe me, Miss Hanshew, if any legal action could have been taken against Jason, that action would have been taken long, long ago."

"But it is wicked, monstrous, that a man should be permitted to publish such an attack against a reputable, honest Government."

"We thoroughly agree with you, but Jason is careful to remain just within the law."

"Why have you shewn me the pamphlet? You still have not answered my question as to where it came from."

"It, and others like it, are circulated by the hundred thousand. Your milkman could probably pass one on to you. Or your coalman, or your postman. Tell me, would you consider the man who writes the pamphlets an enemy of your father?"

"An enemy! You have used too kind a word. He is a devil, a clever, scheming devil. Yes, an enemy indeed, not only of my family, but of all mankind."

"You would not want to have anything to do with him?"

"How could you ask such a question? Because I am fond of dancing, do you believe me to be a traitor to my father, and my country?"

"Have you courage, Miss Hanshew? The moral courage to hear distressing news?"

"What are you inferring? For heaven's sake, what are you trying to tell me?"

"That Jason is the man you love—Xavier Wylson!"

Pamela's reaction to this charge was amazing. Her face changed. She laughed, sincerely, wholeheartedly.

"Do you expect me to believe such a ridiculous story?" she demanded scornfully.

"It happens to be true."

"True! You are mad. You have private reasons for being spiteful to him. I thought so from the first. Now I am sure of the fact. Now will you go? I have listened to you in patience. I do not want to hear more."

"But suppose that it were true, would you marry Xavier Wylson?"

"It could not be true. Xavier is the kindest, straightest man in the world."

"But suppose it were true, would you marry him?" Penelope repeated firmly.

The repetition of the question shook Pamela. Her eyes became anxious. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"If—if—if it were true, I would rather die than marry him. But it is not true."

"You refuse to believe what we tell you?"

"I love Xavier," she stated simply.

Despite her exasperation, Penelope had to admire the loyalty of the Home Secretary's daughter. She had not inherited her love of dancing from her father, but evidently she had inherited his forthrightness, his courage, and his trust in those he liked and admired.

"You must believe us," Penelope urged desperately. "We are not moved by spite for Wylson, or your father, or you. We have only one desire. To prevent your marrying the man we know to be Jason."

Pamela laughed happily. "I believe you," she admitted surprisingly. "And I will make you a promise."

"Well?"

"On one condition only, I will promise not to marry Xavier Wylson."

"And the condition?"

Pamela laughed again, confidently this time. "Bring me proof to substantiate your charge," she said lightly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOR THE FIRST FEW MILES OF THEIR RETURN JOURNEY PENELOPE and Tony maintained a profound silence, each being deeply engaged in thought. For her part, Penelope could not forget Pamela Hanshew. Pamela, she thought, was the type of person whose friendship any girl would value. It was difficult to imagine her performing an unkind act; her nature was so obviously honest and forthright.

It was true she had deceived her father by visiting a night-club against his wishes. But her reason for doing so had been quite innocent; it was rather natural for a girl of her age, young, vigorous and healthy, to desire an occasional escape from the austere atmosphere of her home. Moreover, Penelope was quite prepared to believe that Pamela would not have deceived her father to the extent she had without the encouragement—probably the very pressing encouragement—of Xavier Wylson.

What love Pamela bore for the man! Penelope thrilled with the knowledge that such love could exist, and with the recollection of Pamela's demeanour when she had been told that the man she loved was none other than the pamphleteer. Not for a moment had the accusation concerning Wylson shaken her sublime confidence in him. Her love entirely filled her heart, leaving no room for doubts and niggling suspicions.

Hers was a rare and wonderful love, but Penelope sighed, for it seemed to her that Pamela's love for Wylson was more tragic than enviable. It did not seem right that such consuming love should be wasted on a man who was not only old enough to be her father, but, at the same time, was unworthy either of

her or her love. Whatever might happen in the future, Pamela was destined for unhappiness. If she married Wylson in good faith, then he would be an elderly man by the time she would have reached her prime of life. On the other hand, if by some miracle Tony was able to prove to her satisfaction that Wylson was Jason, then she would suffer the bitterness of discovering that he had forfeited the right to her love.

If! Unfortunately the age of miracles was long over. The chances of Tony's being able to produce that proof were a hundred to one against. No, a thousand to one against, considering the precautions which Wylson took to prevent his secrets being discovered.

An expression of sadness crossed Penelope's face. Of the two evils which faced the daughter of the Home Secretary it almost seemed—at least, to Penelope—that the proof of Jason's identity would be the lesser. No doubt the tragedy would be a poignant one for Pamela to bear, but time would be her ally, and would doubtless heal her wound. But if she were married to Wylson, time would be, not her ally, but her enemy. The tragedy, instead of being immediate and intense, would be slow and dragging; the misery of it would sap her vitality, extinguish her vivacity.

Poor Pamela Hanshew! For the sake of her eventual happiness, how pleasant it would be to prove Jason's identity! Penelope sighed. One might as well hope for perpetual spring as expect Tony to achieve the impossible. She turned towards him, and saw that he was staring at the road ahead with an air of concentration far in excess of that required by the small amount of traffic.

"What is the matter, Tony?"

"Matter!" he repeated in an absent-minded manner.

"Nothing."

"You are frowning terribly."

"Am I?" His expression changed as he smiled vaguely.

"I was just thinking."

"Of Pamela Hanshew and Wylson?"

"Of course."

"I was afraid our errand would prove useless, my dear. You see, I know women better than you do. Pamela loves her man far too passionately for her ever to believe that he is anything but ninety-nine per cent saint. She is convinced that you have a spite against Wylson. Nothing you can say or do

will ever make her see him in his true colours—until it is too late."

"Except the proof for which she has asked."

"The reason she asked for it was because she was convinced there was none to be had."

"Of course, darling, but if that proof were forthcoming I think she would live up to her promise not to marry him."

"If, Tony! But she is strong-minded, and not easily swayed: the proof would have to be irrefutable—and where is proof of that kind likely to be found?—even if any exists, which is unlikely."

"In *Three Ways*, for that is where he does all his work."

"Then there it will have to remain," she said hopelessly.

"But will it?" he asked cheerfully.

She was immediately alarmed. "Tony! What do you mean by that?"

"Listen, Penny darling. I have seen my father at work. Most of the time he is a fluent writer; what he writes down is almost a finished copy. Of course, he always revises and corrects his work at least three times—the first time while he is writing, the second after the stuff has been typed, and the third when the printer's proofs are sent to him. What I am getting at is this: he does not write half a page, become dissatisfied with what he has written, tear the page off the block, chuck it in the waste-paper basket, and begin again on another sheet.

"Still, there are times when the Muse does not work too easily, especially for the first page or two of something new, short stories and books alike; his theory being that the first and last paragraphs are the most important. Sometimes there are bits and pieces of his writing floating around which would quickly identify him, first as Richard Verrell, by the handwriting, and afterwards by the text, as the author of such-and-such. Then, of course, one is apt to find scraps of notes around relating to possible plots, or a sheet of paper with a dozen titles jotted down, and, of course, carbon copies of typed material. And so on. As far as I know, most writers have similar habits. I wonder, therefore, if Wylson is an exception to the rule. I cannot believe that he can sit down and scribble off all that tripe of his without leaving around at least one scrap of paper relating to his pamphlets."

"Granted that you are right, Tony, how will that fact help us?"

"Don't you think Pamela would be convinced of the truth if we were able to show her a piece of manuscript in his own handwriting, side by side with a pamphlet on which was printed those same words?"

"How could she help believing the evidence of her own eyes, Tony? But what is the use of indulging in dreams? Any manuscript of his which might be at *Three Ways* is no more available to us than if it were in Australia."

"Nonsense, Penny. It still takes a few days to get to Australia even by air. One can reach *Three Ways* in half as many hours."

"Tony! What idiotic scheme are you hatching in that crazy brain of yours?"

"I am merely proposing to have a dekkko round his study—he has one—in the hope of finding one of those scraps of paper. There is nothing idiotic in that suggestion, is there?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" she exclaimed, in a voice high-pitched with anxiety. "You saw the reception we received the other day when we drove to *Three Ways*. I don't believe you would be allowed inside the house, still less in Wylson's private study."

"I wasn't exactly proposing to ask permission to visit the study," he pointed out mildly.

"Dear lord! What have you in mind, Tony? Have you forgotten that at least six men inhabit the house, some of them for the express purpose of keeping out uninvited guests? Please, please, Tony, whatever madness you are contemplating, give it up—"

"There were more than six men in *Castle Rising* at the time I entered it as an uninvited guest," he interrupted with a chuckle. "Of course, I can't hope always to find a skittish young bullock to do the dirty work of busting a way into the house, but there are other ways and means, as Murger found to his cost."

"But that was different," she protested. "The house was empty when you entered, and all you had to do was to step from the window of the house next door, straight into Murger's bedroom. Besides, Murger was not anticipating a visit."

"Will Wylson be expecting a visitor?"

"In all probability, yes," she replied swiftly. "He may already have heard that an unknown person has accused him of being Jason."

"Do you think Pamela will have told him of our call?"

"If she has not done so already, she will do so when next they meet. Her frank nature would not permit her to keep such an accusation secret. When Wylson hears from her that she has demanded proof, I am sure that he will take precautions to see that nobody ever obtains it."

"I hadn't thought of that," Tony muttered. "But Penny, I must do something to get hold of some evidence against him. We cannot let that dirty swine get away with writing those damnable pamphlets of his without doing something to pay him back in his own coin. And I am sure of one thing. Nothing is likely to hurt him more than the knowledge that Pamela knows him for what he really is."

"Oh! I agree, Tony, but there is nothing you can do. I am sure of that. Wylson is too clever. We have done our best . . ." Her words tailed off as she realized the weakness of her argument, which was more likely to spur Tony on than to halt him. She glanced quickly at his face, and saw by the way his eyes twinkled and danced with excitement that her effort had failed. She had seen that same expression before, and had learned the measure of his obstinacy.

II

That night, as he lay awake in bed, the reaction from his previous excitement set in. He had spoken blithely to Penelope of his intention to enter the house as an uninvited guest, but when he contemplated the idea in cold blood the absurdity of his boasting became obvious.

First and foremost, he was the son of Blackshirt, not Blackshirt himself. He might—and, in fact, did—possess the same adventurous daring, the same joy in flirting with danger, but the cold, dismal fact remained, that he did not possess Blackshirt's skill and expert knowledge. Blackshirt, at an early, receptive age, had been taught, and drilled into, a criminal career; he had been instructed how to pick even the most delicate of locks; how to listen to the movement of tumblers, and so gain an idea of their mechanism; how to cut window-panes without making a noise; how to walk along the squeakiest of floors without ever provoking a protesting squeal; how to remain motionless (to say nothing of remaining patient) for hour after hour; how to slip from one dark shadow to

the next with a minimum of movement; how to pick pockets with unsurpassed dexterity; how to use a jemmy expertly; how to open all but the most modern of safes—and many other tricks of a criminal's trade.

With his knowledge of these tricks, the skill to perform them expertly, and, above all, with his uncanny climbing ability, Blackshirt would have had every hope of breaking into *Three Ways*, of making his way to Wylson's study, and of picking any and every lock which was to be found there.

Tony grinned ruefully. Not so Lord Blackshirt—the son of Blackshirt. He, Tony, shared with Blackshirt no more than two of Blackshirt's faculties—the first, that of seeing in the dark; the second, an uncanny aptitude for devising extempore and ingenious stratagems for overcoming apparently insuperable difficulties.

The recollection of a dozen such stratagems employed by Blackshirt at one time or another intruded themselves into Tony's thoughts—old Marshall had never tired of enlarging upon the cracksman's genius for such devices. That occasion, at a fancy-dress ball, when, disguised as a monk, he had stolen a famous rope of pearls. The theft had been discovered; every guest had been searched. In vain. First the monk had disappeared, although every door and window in the building had been guarded. Then the pearls. Yet how simple the trick had been. Underneath the monk's habit Blackshirt had worn a second fancy dress—that of an Indian rajah. The moment the pearls were his he had slipped out of the monk's habit and had placed a turban on his head. Hey presto! The monk was gone, never to be seen again. As for the pearls, the Indian rajah wore them openly and brazenly round his neck—one of a dozen such ropes; but the rest were made of theatrical paste!

Then there was the time when Blackshirt had joined the guests at a certain garden party—although guards had been posted to see that there was no chance of his entering the grounds. He had done so by clinging to the axle-shaft underneath one of the now antique, high-slung T model Fords. Subsequently he had escaped, when his presence was discovered and men were closing in upon him, by using a vaulting-pole to leap over their heads, and over the wall behind them.

Then the time when a policeman persisted in remaining outside a house which it was Blackshirt's intention to enter. Blackshirt had crept among the shadows to a house farther

down the road, on the opposite side, where he had built a small bonfire, which he had set alight. Naturally, the bonfire attracted the bobby's attention, and while the regulation police boots had been busily scattering and stamping out the fire, Blackshirt had calmly returned to the first house and had broken in.

And, of course, that memorable occasion when he and a girl had been trapped at the top of a house filled with police constables anxious to arrest him. That situation had seemed hopeless, but Blackshirt had surmounted it. He had locked the door, opened the windows, set light to the curtains, and had made the girl shriek for help. In due course the Fire Brigade had made its welcome appearance, and had elevated the escape to the window, where an apparently distraught girl was still shrieking for help. A fireman had quickly made his way up the escape ladder and into the burning room. A minute or two later he had descended the ladder, carrying an unconscious girl. It was not until the police had broken into the top bedroom, and had found a cursing, helpless fireman and scarcely any trace of fire—but no Blackshirt—that it was realized that it was Blackshirt who had descended the escape, disguised by the fireman's uniform and helmet. By that time, of course, he had quietly slipped away among the crowd, and was a mile or so distant.

Again and again, and yet again, had Blackshirt's fertile brain saved him from seemingly certain arrest, or had enabled him to by-pass apparently unpassable obstacles. Lord Blackshirt, of the next generation, already had proved that he was just as capable of extemporizing. So, presently, Tony stopped considering the problem of entering *Three Ways* by a direct approach—if unlawfully entering a house by breaking in could be considered a direct approach—and turned his attention to studying the possibility of effecting an entrance by ingenuity. What might happen to him when and if he should succeed in getting into *Three Ways* would have to be in the lap of the gods.

For a long time he grappled with the problem. He recollected one of Blackshirt's exploits, related by old Marshall, years ago, in which Blackshirt had passed himself off as a telephone tester. He had presented himself at the door of a certain house, and had informed the maid who had opened the door that the line had been reported out of order. Unsuspecting, the maid had allowed him into the house, and had led him to the telephone

fuse boxes. There he had quietly abstracted the fuses, whereupon the line had become well and truly out of order. During the next thirty minutes Blackshirt, while presumably looking for the fault, had succeeded in getting a very good idea of the lay-out of the house. As soon as he was satisfied he had replaced the fuses. The maid had been quite impressed with the efficiency of the handsome and polite telephone tester, and it never subsequently occurred to her, or to anyone else for that matter, that there was any connection between the tester and the mysterious black shadow which, later, had feloniously entered the house during the hours of darkness.

For a while Torry contemplated using this plan of his father's as a means of gaining an entry into *Three Ways*, but closer analysis forced him to abandon the idea. In the first case, it seemed hardly likely that the shrewd-faced butler at *Three Ways* would be so easily bamboozled as the unsuspecting maid of *Steyn Grange*. Secondly, it was only too likely that he would be recognized as the young man who had asked to see Doctor Luke. Ruefully, he decided that his previous visit to *Three Ways* had not been nearly so clever as he had thought, for the possibility—the probability, in fact—of being recognized applied equally to any plan which might call for him to pose as someone else.

Continued contemplation of his proposal to find some way into *Three Way* forced him to realize that there were many more difficulties to be faced than he had originally foreseen when he had so blithely made up his mind. Because he had neither Blackshirt's knowledge nor his skill, he could not hope to break into the house by night; because he had foolishly allowed the butler-fellow at *Three Ways* to see his face there seemed no way of entering by day. Yet, because there was no other alternative, he had to choose one period or the other—that is, if he were to try to supply the proof needed to convince Pamela Hanshaw that her lover, Xavier Wylson, was also the pamphleteer, Jason.

Which period?

He frowned his perplexity and indecision, but in a moment of temporary depression a ray of hope occurred to him with all the vividness and contrast of a beacon-light flashing through stormy darkness—he remembered Daphne's light-hearted chatter to the effect that Wylson visited town approximately once a month, usually for two or three consecutive nights. The fact that those three nights were consecutive suggested that

Wylson was in the habit of staying at his Hampstead home while in town instead of returning each night to *Three Ways*; otherwise there was no reason for his not visiting La Belle Lorraine whenever he felt so inclined. Perhaps Wylson had a prejudice against being driven too much at one time, or perhaps against being driven at night-time. Besides, on the nights when Pamela was not his companion, he often stayed at the night-club until the early hours of morning. This fact was far from proving that Wylson slept in town, but it was a pointer.

Another fact which Daphne had made clear was that Wylson moved nowhere without being accompanied by his two bodyguards. On those nights, therefore, when Wylson visited London, there would be three men less in *Three Ways* than were usually there.

Surely advantage could be taken of the absence of Wylson and his two bodyguards. Tony's task of entering the house might be no easier in consequence, but certainly, if he were to succeed in doing so, the chances against his being caught were reduced by nearly half. In addition, with Wylson in town, the business of searching his rooms was less likely to be interrupted.

Wylson, of course, was not likely to be visiting town for another three weeks or so—but the time element was of little consequence. Besides, those weeks could be used for the purpose of making any preparations which might be necessary.

With those comforting thoughts making him feel rather more optimistic than he had been fifteen minutes previously, Tony dropped off to sleep.

During the rest of the night he was not conscious of dreaming, but at seven a.m. sharp he awakened with a possible plan of action clearly outlined in his brain. Excitedly, he examined it from every angle—and found it satisfactory.

A smile of pure delight sprang into his eyes, passed to his lips, and slowly spread over his face. The plan was worthy of Blackshirt himself! What more could be said of it than that?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ONE THURSDAY MORNING, SOME WEEKS LATER, SUPERINTENDENT Stevens nodded to Detective-Sergeant Grant, who had just

entered the room. "Good morning, Grant. Sit down. What do you want to see me about?"

"This." Grant handed a slip of paper to the superintendent, who twice carefully read the words typed upon it. At the conclusion of his second reading Stevens shook his head doubtfully.

"It seems innocent enough."

"It seems almost too innocent."

"Come, come, Grant, you must not be prejudiced into making mountains out of molehills. I think it is time that you relinquished the special assignment and concentrated again on normal duties. In the last two weeks some of us have been considerably overworked."

Grant glanced anxiously at the superintendent's face for signs that Stevens had not spoken too seriously in making that statement, but what he saw was not encouraging.

"Surely I am not to give it up absolutely?" he pleaded.

"Listen to me, Grant. I am not going to say that there is not good reason for believing that your theory is a feasible one. I will readily admit that young Verrell's conduct was, at one time, suspicious. But you have been granted considerable latitude during the past weeks, without producing a tittle of evidence against anyone, even Anthony Verrell. Since his visit to the Home Secretary's house—which seems to suggest that he is on visiting terms with the very Cabinet Minister to whom both you and I are ultimately responsible—he has done nothing whatever which could possibly justify us in believing that he is the man who has been crudely imitating one of Edgar Wallace's *Four Just Men*. In those circumstances can you reasonably expect the Assistant Commissioner to continue countenancing your chasing shadows at the expense of the substance? Even if Verrell was in fact your man, it looks as if your meeting with him warned him off the course, as it were."

"I wish I could believe that, for he seems a nice chap. But, having met him, I don't think that any warning of mine would make him change his plans. There is more than a hint of obstinacy in his nature, and there was a reckless expression in his eyes which made me think that the added danger of being watched by Scotland Yard would serve to spur him on rather than check him."

"Be that as it may, he has, to the best of our knowledge, done nothing in the past few weeks. I am sorry, but as from today you must resume your normal duties."

"Can I have just until the end of the week? I believe that something will have happened before then to prove that I have been on the right track."

"What makes you think so?"

"His telephone conversation of last night."

"You mean this?" Stevens picked up the paper which Grant had passed over to him, and read its text for the third time.

TIME: 11.21 p.m. Incoming call, from a number subsequently identified as a public call-box in Piccadilly Underground Station.

Victoria 01031: "Hullo!"

Caller (male): "Tony?"

Vic. 01031: "Speaking."

Caller: "I am 'phoning you up, old man, to let you know that the book has turned up after all. I found it tonight; at the bottom of an old trunk, of all places, which I had not opened for months."

Vic. 01031: "I am glad to hear the news; it would have been a rotten shame to have lost it for good. What about the photograph?"

Caller: "I haven't seen that yet, but I don't doubt but that, the one having turned up, the second will do so in due course."

Vic. 01031: "I hope so. Thanks for letting me know. Everything else okay with you?"

Caller: "Absolutely in the pink. So long, old cock."

Vic. 01031: "Good night."

Stevens gazed across the desk at the younger man. "What do you make of this conversation?"

"You notice the time?"

"Eleven twenty-one p.m. Well?"

"Surely that is a late hour for one man to telephone another, just to say that he had found a book. That information could well have been left over for the morning."

The superintendent rubbed his chin. "True! true!" he admitted. "But some people have no idea of time."

"So I have found out at times while on observation duty." Grant smiled wryly. "But have you ever heard of people keeping books at the bottom of a trunk?"

"Yes," Stevens admitted drily. "During the war, when the Government asked us to clear out our lofts, I came across an old trunk full of books—all rubbishy books, I am sorry to say."

Grant was temporarily disconcerted. "Yes, and that reminds me of an old aunt——" He angrily pursed his lips together. "In view of that telephone conversation, I telephoned Maurice of La Belle Lorraine this morning. It may be only a coincidence, but Xâvier Wyſon was there last night for the first time in several weeks. He arrived there just after eleven p.m."

Stevens stared at the sergeant. "What might be the connection between Wyſon and the conversation?"

"This," Grant began crisply. "We know that Verrell toured part of Surrey while making enquiries into Wyſon's private life. When he realized that he was under suspicion, I think he decided to lie low for a time while other people, unknown to us, did the business for him. That may have been the reason for that elaborate system of calls from one public call-box to another which preceded Verrell's visit to Miss Hanshew."

The superintendent nodded. "It might be. Go on."

"Well, Verrell may have learned that Wyſon was in the habit of paying occasional visits to La Belle Lorraine—Maurice told me that Wyſon visits there about once a month, as a rule for three or four consecutive nights. As soon as Verrell realized this, it is very possible that he asked a friend of his to go to the club nightly so as to report immediately to Verrell Wyſon's next visit. Such a course would have made it unnecessary for him, or his friends, to hang around in Surrey, where one of our men might have run across him."

"A feasible theory," Stevens agreed. "Then you suggest that the book which has just turned up again is a code word for Wyſon?"

"I do."

"And the photograph? To what, or to whom, does that refer?"

This time it was Grant who shook his head doubtfully. "I don't know," he confessed. "So far the photograph has me beaten."

"Now tell me why you think something may happen before the end of the week."

"Suppose that Verrell is planning to punish Wyſon by doing something to *Three Ways*—Wyſon's Surrey home—something

like setting fire to it, or trying to rob it of something much treasured by its owner, Wylson's absence in town possibly presents an opportunity of which Verrell hopes to take advantage. What is more, I have an idea that Verrell's accomplice at La Belle Lorraine is supposed to take a hand."

"Why do you think that?"

"Verrell's question: 'Is everything okay with you?'"

"That could be a slangy form of politeness, Grant."

"It could also mean: 'Is everything prepared at your end?'"

"I suppose it could." Stevens thoughtfully rubbed his chin as he pondered on the situation. "You know, Grant, you have a highly developed imagination, which can infer just what you want it to, from even the most innocuous remark. I hope you do not let that imagination lead you astray. If I grant your request, and allow you to carry on with the special assignment, what do you propose to do?"

Grant was nettled by the superintendent's rebuke. "Park myself in the vicinity of *Three Ways* in the hope of catching Anthony Verrell redhanded," he replied in a harsh, angry voice.

"Very well, then, you are granted until midnight Saturday," Stevens agreed, indicating that the interview was over.

II

Towards dusk the same evening a light van turned off the Mickleham road on to the drive leading to *Three Ways*. Although there was very little light left, its progress did not pass unnoticed from the house. By the time the van pulled up opposite the main entrance a man was already standing on the uppermost step of the portico—the same sharp-faced man, in fact, who had talked with Tony a month previously—his name was Morgan.

"What do you want?" Morgan demanded of the van-driver.

"Three penn'orth of fish and chips," the other man replied breezily.

"With vinegar," the van-driver's mate called out.

"I don't want none of your lip. I asked you what you wanted."

"If this here house is called *Three Ways*, then it's this here house we wants."

"This is *Three Ways*."

"I should blooming well hope so, too," the van-driver grumbled. "It's taken us long enough to find it."

"What do you want?" Morgan demanded for the third time, his voice thick with fury.

"Now what the 'ell do you think we wants?" the van-driver asked irritably. "We might be guests, but then again we mightn't, because guests usually arrive in posh cars, from what I knows of 'em, and you wouldn't call this a posh car, now, would you?"

"It looks like a delivery van to me."

"Chase me Aunt Fanny back to Stepney if that ain't just what it is and all, mate. And inside is a little present from Egypt."

Morgan was astonished.

"Egypt?"

"Or Syria, or Persia—they are all the same to me, me having done me bit in Libya, and them other places as well, and not knowing which one was worse than the others. 'Cept Cairo, now; that's a hell of a place——"

"I haven't ordered anything to be sent here," Morgan interrupted.

"Haven't you, now!" the van-driver mocked. "Now ain't that strange! The old josser what hired us to drive out here must 'ave been cuckoo when he said as how the Mr. Xavier Wylson what lived here said that this here packet was to be delivered without fail."

"Mr. Wylson! Did he order something to be brought here?"

"How the 'ell should I know? I'm only a blinking van-driver what takes me orders and carries 'em out." But if you ain't ordered it, we can't force you to take the ruddy package. We'd best be getting back as soon as we can." The van-driver pressed the self-starter.

"Wait a minute!" Morgan ordered sharply. The whirr of the self-starter faded away. "My name isn't Wylson. I'm Mr. Wylson's butler, but he didn't say anything to me about expecting a package, especially at this time of day."

"Ain't that a pity! Well, mate, are you going to accept the blasted package, or ain't you? Make up your mind, will you, so as we can get off to our suppers? We shall be late enough as it is."

"Where are you from?"

"The old josser what hired us is from the New Century Art Galleries."

"I have never heard of the place," Morgan said suspiciously.

The van-driver laughed hoarsely. "I'm not surprised. It's a wonder to me that anyone has ever heard of the place. I wouldn't buy anything there if you gave me the money to do so. It's the craziest-looking lot of junk you have ever seen. You think you are looking at a picture of a cow grazing in a field close to a windmill, but when you looks at the tab underneath, what do you see? The Hon. Mrs. Hogsblather and Friend. What a suck-in! Blimey, if I was the Hon. Mrs. Hogsblather I should not feel pleased at being made to look like an old cow."

"Is it a picture you have inside for Mr. Wylson?"

"It ain't that; no blooming fear it ain't. Don't I wish it was?"

"What is it, then?"

"Have a look for yourself, mister." The van-driver handed an envelope to Morgan, who opened and studied it with the help of a flashlight. Inside was a delivery note from the New Century Art Galleries, Burlington Arcade, W.1, made out: "To the order of Mr. Xavier Wylson, *Three Ways*, near Leatherhead, Surrey. One 'Galeotti with Crystal'. For immediate delivery, without fail."

"All right, hand it over," Morgan said at last.

"Hand it over! Blimey! What do you think of that?" The van-driver appealed to his mate with a hoarse laugh. He turned to Morgan again. "The blinking thing is as much as me and Bill can lift between us. Don't you understand, mate, it's one of them statue affairs like you sees in palaces and museums."

"Mr. Wylson wouldn't buy one of those," Morgan said sharply.

"All right, he wouldn't. Have it your own way. But what about this here Galley Ottey? Will you take it in, or won't you?"

Morgan hesitated before reaching a decision, but at last he said: "All right, but drive round to the tradesmen's entrance at the back. There are a couple of men there to give you a hand in shifting the statue into the house. Take that road leading to the right, and stop outside the first door you come to. I'll meet you there."

The van drove round to the indicated door, where, after a few moments, the two men inside were joined by Morgan and two other men. The driver and his mate climbed down from their seats and opened the van doors behind. In the light which streamed from the open door a large-sized, heavy packing-case, approximately six feet six in length, and two feet square, was seen lying on the floor of the van.

"For Gawd's sake don't drop the blasted case—at least, not

while me and Bill here are handling it," the driver warned Morgan. "Them statues can break if they are not treated carefully, and we don't want the sack yet awhile. Me and Bill will take the far end if two of you take this end, and lower gently to the ground."

"Tom, John, take this end," Morgan ordered.

If did not take the four men long to carry the case into the house, where they laid it down upon the floor of the servants' hall.

"Where are we going to put it?" Tom asked Morgan.

"I'll telephone Mr. Hinkson. While I am gone give these men some beer and help yourselves to a glass."

Beer was served all round, but before the glasses had been drained Morgan was back again.

"Mr. Hinkson doesn't know anything about the statue, but he says to put the case in the spare store-room."

"Shall we open it?" John asked eagerly. "Perhaps it is a statue of Venus or Sykey. Personally, I don't mind one or two of them kind of statues dotted around; it gives a man something to look at now and again."

"It is not a statue of a woman, and it is not to be opened," Morgan rasped. "If you ask my opinion, either Mr. Wylson has gone off, his head or there's something fishy about the whole business. In any case, it will only be something else to be cleaned and dusted."

"I hadn't thought of that," John muttered grumblingly.

The packing-case was duly carried into the spare store-room, where, on the van-driver's advice, it was set on end, the case being marked 'This End Up' at one end. As soon as the task was completed Morgan turned to the two strangers.

"Is that all?" he asked pointedly.

The driver laughed sourly. "In a hurry to get rid of us, aren't you?"

"Just now you were in a hurry to go."

"So we are and all. We shall be lucky to get home in time for our suppers. Come along, Bill. Let's get cracking."

Morgan glanced significantly at Tom. Tom nodded. "This way," he said to the driver and his mate.

III

Quietness reigned in *Three Ways*. Several hours had passed since the delivery of the statue of Galeotti, and everyone had

retired to bed; Morgan last of all, after checking that all doors and windows were properly bolted. For a full half-hour no sound had been heard except from the upper part of the servants' quarters.

Below, in the spare store-room, the front section of the packing-case slowly opened, and Tony, his face vivacious with excitement, carefully stepped out on to the flagged floor. It was not the first time he had opened the front, but hitherto he had done so only for the purpose of listening to what was happening elsewhere in the house. Now, satisfied that it was time to proceed with the next part of his plan, he prepared to leave the store-room and search for the room in which, presumably, Wylson composed the pamphlets by which he hoped to undermine the existing government and all that sound government has meant to England.

Tony had prepared himself for his nocturnal visit as far as he could, but he grinned cheerfully as he reflected upon how far his total outfit fell short of what Blackshirt had been in the habit of wearing. Blackshirt had worn black shoes, with crêpe rubber soles, black socks, black dress trousers, black shirt, black tie, black gloves, and a black mask, or sometimes a black hood. Dressed thus he had been a black, silent shadow, almost invisible to the eye except when a beam of light fell directly upon him. Beneath his black shirt he had been in the habit of wearing a slotted, pouched belt in which was to be found almost everything a cracksman might need, from jemmies of the finest tempered steel to a small bottle of chloroform and pad; from a tiny but powerful drill, capable of penetrating all but the toughest metal, to a selection of skeleton keys.

How different from Lord Blackshirt's simple outfit! How laughably different! Lord Blackshirt wore crêpe rubber shoes; he also wore gloves. Otherwise he was dressed as usual: in a dark tweed suit, with a dark shirt and matching tie which was the envy of his pals. His equipment consisted simply and solely of an electric torch.

Before venturing to use his torch for the first time Tony listened again for warning sounds. That was another of Blackshirt's customs which Marshall had passed on to him many years ago, little suspecting that the knowledge was one day to serve the son as it had once served the father. Blackshirt had used his ears as a second pair of eyes, and his sensitive fingertips as yet a third pair. This example, Tony had previously decided, was one which he might well follow. For a full five minutes—or what

seemed to him like five minutes—he stood motionless, listening acutely. All he heard, however, was the loud thumping of his own excited heart, which positively refused to work at a normal beat.

Having heard nothing to alarm him, he pressed the button of his torch. Immediately a powerful beam of light came into being; so bright that it startled him. Then he appreciated that his own nervous excitement was probably magnifying the brightness. Even so, he dimmed the light by wrapping an old, spare handkerchief round the top, and with the aid of the subdued light proceeded to examine the room he was in.

There was nothing extraordinary about the store-room: its floor was flagged; its brick wall plastered and colour-washed. Here and there, on the floor or on shelves, were odds and ends such as one uses only occasionally; step-ladders, glue-pots, tins of paint, paint-brushes, flue-brushes, etc. It had only one door, and in the wall opposite a small window. This was bare and uncurtained, and might represent a source of danger, unless he were careful not to flash his light about in such a way that its reflection on the colour-washed walls was re-reflected off or through the window-panes. Keeping this danger in mind, he proceeded towards the door, which he opened.

The house remained silent, except for the vague, almost indefinable noises which are rarely absent from any building, inhabited or empty—the scampering of mice behind the wainscoting, the sighing of wind down the chimneys, the rubbing of twigs against window-panes, the flapping of curtains and hangings, the creaking of boards responding to a change in atmosphere, the restless rustling of birds beneath the eaves, the reverberations of distant traffic, the echoing hum of telephone wires, the cracking of cane furniture, the heavy breathing, or even snoring, of human beings, the muffled twang of bedsprings. . . .

One or another of these sounds startled Tony as he made his way towards the main part of the house, but presently he became almost accustomed to them, and they ceased to worry him. He arrived at a baize-covered door, evidently one which separated the servants' quarters from the rest of the house. It was closed; as he opened it, first the bolt of the lock clicked loudly (at least it seemed incredibly loud) and then the hinges squealed. But resolutely he continued opening the door, for he realized that hesitation would be fatal. Risks had to be taken; he had realized that before leaving home.

On the other side of the door he found himself in a short passage leading to the main entrance hall of the house. He advanced along this passage into the hall itself. It was fairly large, and simply furnished. Four doors opened inwards from it. He had an intuitive feeling that none of them was the door of the room for which he was looking, but he determined to leave nothing to chance, by trying them all in turn.

He did so, but a quick glance at the rooms showed them to be of the formal type, and not at all the kind in which a writer could or would be at his best. Having inspected all four, he made his way determinedly towards the staircase. It seemed asking for trouble, possibly on account of a feeling that it would be less easy to escape from an upper floor, and that he might be trapped by someone barring his way down the staircase. However, he had to reach the rooms on the next floor, so he mounted the stairs—fortunately, heavily carpeted—and reached the upper landing.

There he faced two passages, one to his left, the other to his right, both with at least six doors. He hesitated, wondering which to try first, then selected the right-hand passage.

His intuition was justified. As he opened the door of the first room on the right-hand side of the passage his flashlight revealed a typical, book-lined, man's study. With mounting excitement he entered the room, and carefully closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KNOWING THAT HE MIGHT HAVE TO SPEND SOME TIME IN WYLSON'S study, Tony's first act was to make his way to one of the windows—there were two—and look out. The night was by no means black, for a fairly new moon was still silvering the countryside, and the large lawn which surrounded the house was faintly visible. Tony was less interested in the lawn than in the architecture of the house, for he wanted to make quite sure that he could not be seen. Cautiously raising the window, he looked out, and was relieved to notice that the library could not be overlooked from any other part of the house. He noticed, at the same time, that the roof of the portico over the main entrance was within easy jumping distance of the library window: in the event of

difficulties it should be possible for him to jump on to that roof, and thence on to the soft earth of the flower-bed which bordered the drive on the house side.

He gently closed the window, then carefully drew and arranged the heavy chenille curtains. Then he did the same with the curtains of the second window. Lastly, he crossed to the door, and was gladdened by the sight of a key in the lock. He turned this as carefully as he could. The tumblers made a clicking noise as the spring exerted its full force, but the sound was not particularly sharp, and after his heart had settled down again he decided that the echo of the click was not likely to have disturbed anyone. With that thought, he ventured to look for, and switch on, the electric lights.

For a few moments his eyes were dazzled, but as they adjusted themselves to the light he began his inspection. His attention was immediately attracted by two desks, one on each side of the room. The first was an elaborate article of furniture; large, of age-blackened oak, and heavily carved—an obvious, and very handsome, antique. The second desk was a business-like affair; a modern piece of office furniture on which was a Noiseless typewriter.

It needed no particular perspicacity to realize that the antique desk was probably used by Wylson, and the other by his secretary. Tony wondered which to tackle first. On the one hand, if there were any loose memoranda to be found, in Wylson's own handwriting, the desk used by him seemed the most obvious one to search first, but there had to be taken into consideration the care which Wylson reputedly exercised. On the other hand, as his secretary did not type out the copy for the printers, perhaps Wylson did so himself, during the secretary's absence—for it was certain that he was too cunning to send a handwritten manuscript to the printer lest, by that fatal millionth chance, his handwriting should be recognized. If he were careful not to leave any evidence on his own desk, therefore, how much less likely was he to leave it on the secretary's!

Presently Tony realized that he was wasting time in futile reflection as to where the evidence was *not* likely to be. It was not likely to be anywhere obvious; he had realized that possibility before starting off on his risky adventure. The one chance of success lay in the hope that, on one occasion or another, a note, or a sheet of manuscript, or a typewritten copy, or a printer's proof, had accidentally fallen or slipped into a drawer,

or a pigeon-hole, or a file, where it had been overlooked, and had remained ever since. In those circumstances, one desk might prove as lucky as the other, so Tony decided to examine the nearer first, which chanced to be the secretary's.

During the next fifteen minutes he systematically searched every part of the desk. Taking each drawer in turn, he turned over everything that was in it—he even pulled each drawer out of its grooves, in the faint hope of finding that something had fallen behind. In the course of this search he became familiar with much of Wylson's private and business affairs—he learned that Wylson had shares in this concern, and in that; that he owned property in Kent, Surrey, Hampshire and Somerset; that he was director of seven public companies—but of any document bearing even a remote connection with Jason and Jason's stream of propaganda pamphlets there was none.

From the secretary's desk he crossed the room to the antique desk. This was a beautiful piece of woodwork, and his heart warmed towards it as he caressed its loveliness with his fingers. True, it lacked simplicity, for it had more than a dozen drawers of varying sizes, many pigeon-holes and queer-shaped alcoves, and receptacles for pens, pencils, and inkpots. As he gazed at the desk with glowing eyes a new, depressing thought occurred to him. A desk such as the one before him was almost certain to possess a secret drawer or drawers.

Grimly he banished the suggestion—at least, for the time being; time enough, he told himself, to bring it up again after his search of the more obvious drawers. He sat down in the comfortable chair which faced the desk, and began his task.

It was not long before he learned still more of Wylson's private affairs—how much he paid his employees, the amount of income tax he paid each year, the amount of his average deposit balance at the bank—but, as before, nothing concerning Jason. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

At last Tony realized that the antique desk would prove useless—unless there were, in fact, a secret drawer. He decided to hazard precious time in looking for it: he could not rid himself of the feeling that the desk had to have a secret drawer, and if it had—well, there, of all places, he might expect to find something useful.

He found such a drawer just when he was on the point of giving up the search. Inside were documents such as any man might regard as his most cherished secret: love-letters from

Pamela, and diaries for the past three years. The letters Tony ignored, for he found it distasteful to pry into that part of Wylson's life. The diaries he considered were in a different category—surely in them, if anywhere, he might find some reference to Jason and Jason's activities. But no! The diaries revealed only Wylson's intense and passionate love for Pamela Hanshew. This, and the solution to a minor mystery which had puzzled Tony. The diaries revealed that Pamela was not yet twenty-one. She could not, therefore, marry without the consent either of her father or of the Courts. The entries made it quite plain that Wylson knew it would be hopeless, because of his known political bias, to apply for Hanshew's consent; also, that he shunned the publicity which would result from applying to the Justices for permission to marry. But he wrote rapturously of Pamela's coming majority, and of their eventual wedding. Tony became more than ever convinced that nothing could wound Wylson more deeply than the prevention of his marriage to the girl he worshipped.

But of Jason—nothing!

Tony replaced everything as and where he had found it, and glanced round the room once more. There were two waste-paper baskets, a filing cabinet for correspondence, an armchair in addition to the two desk-chairs, a large carpet on the floor, and, of course, books. Books by the score. Nothing more.

Tony became disheartened. The waste-paper baskets were unlikely to produce anything startling in the shape of evidence, for doubtless they were cleared daily. And what hope could there be of finding a compromising letter, considering that it was probably the duty of the secretary to file correspondence?

As he had anticipated, Tony found the waste-paper basket by the side of the antique desk empty. In the second basket, however, he found waste paper. From this he concluded that the secretary had worked in the study earlier that day. If this was the usual custom it seemed even less likely that Wylson would leave anything lying about which might be found during his absence. Nevertheless, Tony tipped the contents of the second basket out on to the carpet: they consisted of five used envelopes addressed to Wylson, yesterday's sheet from a daily calendar, a carbon copy of an unfinished letter to a firm in Norfolk Street, and a cigarette carton.

What next? He shrugged his shoulders disconsolately. There was nothing else to be done—unless, of course, one went to

extremes, such as looking beneath the rug (a useless procedure, considering how clean and tidy the house was kept), or looking through each one of the books (and how many hours would it take to do that? he wondered absently).

Well, he had made a gallant effort, and had failed. The result was disappointing, but not unexpected. He had known that Wylson was a super-cautious man, and that, in addition, Pamela had probably informed him of the unknown man's accusation, and of her scornful promise to give up her lover if proof were produced that he was Jason. No doubt that interview would have put Wylson even more than usual on his guard.

There was now only one thing to be done—to leave the house and walk south a mile and a quarter to a certain barn, where Jerry had garaged a hired car.

Even as Tony reached that decision he was startled by the sound of a car engine roaring in the direction of the house. Powerful headlights flashed across a narrow opening in the curtains, the existence of which he had not suspected. There was a noise of squealing brakes, brutally applied, followed, a few seconds later, by a violent hammering, and a voice shouting loudly: "Morgan! Morgan! Ward! Norris! Morgan!"

Xavier Wylson had returned to *Three Ways*!

II

Precisely what had brought Wylson home in the early hours of the morning Tony could not imagine, but that it had something to do with his own nocturnal visit to *Three Ways* he was convinced. The roaring exhaust, the heavy braking, the note of urgency in the shouting voice—all went to suggest that Wylson had hurried home as quickly as his car could carry him.

Tony thought of the millionaire's five employees downstairs, hefty men every one of them, and experienced a momentary spasm of thankfulness that he was in one of the few rooms from which there was a fair chance of escape. In any of the others he would have been trapped, for what chance could there have been of his fighting his way past five men? Even so, he would have to hurry; below he could hear the sound of voices, and of feet pounding in the direction of the front door.

Tony hastily switched off the lights and hurried across to the right-hand window, which he cautiously opened. At the same moment the door below was opened.

"Morgan, what the devil is this I hear about a statue being delivered here in a packing-case——" The rest of the sentence became indistinguishable as Wylson entered the house and the car revved up and moved off along the drive towards the rear of the house.

Tony climbed out on to the window-sill. The night was now dark, for while he had been busy searching the study the moon had disappeared. He could no longer see what was below the window, so once again he felt thankful, this time for having taken the precaution of spying out the lie of the land while there had been light. Had he not known that the roof of the portico was no more than a few feet below him to his right he would have hesitated to jump blindly into the black void which surrounded him. As it was, the prospect was not too pleasant. Suppose that the moonlight had deceived him into wrongly estimating the distance between him and the portico roof? If he jumped short he might rebound from the roof, and crash down to the drive, God knows with what injury to himself. If he jumped too powerfully he might be unable to prevent his momentum carrying him over the front edge of the roof.

While he was still pausing he heard alarming sounds from the room behind him—somebody was rattling the handle of the door, in an effort to get in. This was followed by the noise of a kick, then the echo of a muffled shout: "Mr. Wylson! Mr. Wylson!" and, lastly, the dull thud of a shoulder thrusting against the panels of the door.

Tony knew he dare hesitate no longer. Waiting only to visualize for the last time the position of the portico roof as he had seen it in the silvery light of the moon, he leaped into the darkness.

The jump was a true one. With a loud thump he landed on the flat portico roof, ran forward two paces, and for one sickening moment swayed uncertainly on the edge. At the last moment he recovered his balance, and was able to back against the wall of the house. Then he turned, felt his way along the wall to the left-hand edge of the roof, and there poised himself for the second jump down on to the soft, yielding soil of the flower-bed.

From the room he had just left he heard again the sound of a heavy thud. This time it was followed by a splintering crack. He realized that he had escaped only just in time; the door was unlikely to resist much more battering. With a grin of excitement he leaped once more into the darkness. He was conscious

of a slight rush of air past his ears. Then he landed on the soft soil—sooner than he had anticipated. He pitched forward on to his knees, then on to his face, but, unhurt, he scrambled to his feet, ready to bolt across the lawn to the surrounding belt of trees.

He took one pace forward, but no more. A circle of light dispersed the immediate darkness, outlining him starkly in its white glare; two powerful hands fell upon him, one on each shoulder, and a voice in his ear said: "So you refused to pay heed to my warning, Mr. Verrell. Ah well! Now you will have to pay the price of your foolishness."

With a sensation of sickening despair Tony felt the chill steel of a handcuff slipped dexterously round his wrist, and recognized the voice of Detective-Sergeant George Grant.

III

"You should have believed me when I said that the arm of the law was too long even for an intelligent man," Grant continued, his voice a curious mixture of triumph and regret. "You have committed housebreaking, Mr. Verrell, which is a felony, and can be punishable with penal servitude."

Tony steeled himself to maintain control of his emotions. "You will find it difficult to prove that charge," he said shortly. "I didn't break into *Three Ways*, Sergeant. I was freely admitted."

"Maybe!" Grant commented drily. "But you broke out of the house, which is just as much an offence as breaking in. Besides, breaking in can be constructive, as where admission is gained by some device, there being no actual breaking—— I tell you again, Mr. Verrell, you cannot beat the law."

"All right, Sergeant——" Tony was about to tell Grant to get on with his job, and not drag out the agony, when he was interrupted by a violent noise from Wylson's study above. Through the open window came the sound of a loud splintering noise as either the door or its jamb gave way to the pressure being used against it. The light in the room flashed on; there was a dull, thudding noise of heavily booted feet running across the carpeted floor; the curtains were flung open; and a head was thrust out of the window.

Evidently the light which streamed out through the window

illuminated the group below, for suddenly a hoarse voice bellowed out: "There they are, Mr. Wylson! Three of 'em, just below the window! Hey, you! stay where you are or I'll blow holes through all three of you. I have an automatic here, and I can use it, see."

The men below could see that the man was not lying about his weapon; they could just see its ugly-looking muzzle.

"All right! All right!" Grant called back hastily. "You can put that gun of yours away. We are police officers." As Grant spoke a second head emerged from the window. Tony recognized the long, gaunt profile of Xavier Wylson.

"Tell that to the marines," the same voice bellowed scornfully. "I've got you covered."

"Quiet, Barbour," Wylson ordered sharply. "Then, to the men below: 'Did I hear you say that you were police officers?'"

"Are you Mr. Xavier Wylson?"

"Yes."

"I am Detective-Sergeant Grant, and my companion Detective-Constable Pigott, both of the C.I.D."

"Very well, I will be down."

Wylson disappeared from the window, but all three men below noticed that Barbour remained hanging out of the window, with his automatic still prominently displayed. Evidently Wylson did not intend to take any chances until he had satisfied himself that Grant had spoken the truth.

Presently lights flashed on under the portico roof. The door opened, and Morgan appeared, clad in pyjamas and dressing-gown.

"Will you come in, please?" he said, speaking in a sullen voice which well matched his expression—in spite of his own troubles the thought occurred to Tony that Morgan knew that he was due for a reprimand for his share in admitting the packing-case into the house.

The three men entered the house, where they were met by an angry-mouthed, angry-eyed Wylson.

"Which of you calls himself Detective-Sergeant Grant?" he demanded snappingly.

"I am he," Grant replied. "Here is my warrant card, sir."

Wylson gave the warrant card a close scrutiny before handing it back to the sergeant.

"Now, Sergeant, perhaps you will be good enough to explain what you were doing trespassing on private property."

The question was so unexpected that Grant could barely

manage to do more than stutter: "I—I—well, I'll be—I mean—I don't understand—"

"The question was plain enough. I am not aware that police officers, any more than private citizens, have the right to trespass on private property."

Grant began to recover his composure. "In ordinary circumstances, perhaps not, sir," he said in a sharp, unpleasant voice. "But in the execution of his duty a police officer may enter upon private property in order to effect the arrest of anyone whom he has good cause to suspect of having committed, or being about to commit, a felony."

"Indeed! And may I be permitted to ask whom you had cause to suspect of committing a felony?"

"This man." Grant held up his left arm to expose his hand handcuffed to Tony's.

Wylson's gaze rested for a moment upon Tony's downcast face. "And what was the particular felony you suspected him of having committed, or being about to commit?"

"Housebreaking is all I know for certain, sir, but perhaps you may be able to supply further evidence to support a charge of burglary, or, alternatively, being in a building with intent."

"Before I answer that question, Sergeant, I should be obliged if you would tell me what made you believe your prisoner was in this house feloniously."

Grant's face flushed at Wylson's scornful manner. "Because I've had him under observation for some weeks, and knew that he was up to some mischief in this house. This morning I received information to the effect that he was planning something for tonight, so Pigott and I posted ourselves where we could watch the house—"

"Posted yourselves where?"

"Among the trees, to begin with."

"Why did you not ask my permission?"

"I—I—well, sir, we can't afford to advertise our plans by taking too many people into our confidence." As though fearing another interruption, Grant hurried on: "Anyway, sure enough, in due course we saw a crack of light coming from one of the windows here, so we decided to investigate. As the light persisted, we hid ourselves in a convenient spot. Later, this man jumped out of a window clean into our arms."

"I see. But suppose I tell you, Sergeant, that the man handcuffed to your wrist had leave and licence to visit this house:

would you still be prepared to charge him with housebreaking?"

"What! Good lord! I know damn' well he didn't have leave and licence."

Wylson eyed the irate detective coldly. "Do you doubt my word, Sergeant?" the millionaire demanded in a voice which was menacing in its iciness.

A long silence followed the question. An expression of impotence settled on Grant's face. "No, sir," he replied huskily. "I didn't mean to infer that. But..." He paused hopelessly.

"But what?"

"If he has your permission to jump in and out of your windows there is no use me charging him with housebreaking," the sergeant explained flatly.

"Not unless you are willing to take the risk of an action against you for false arrest."

Grant pursed his lips, then shrugged his shoulders in a hopeless, resigned gesture. Slowly he lifted his arm so that he could unlock the handcuffs.

"This time you are lucky, Mr. Verrell," he muttered in a strangled voice. "Evidently you have Mr. Wylson taped, as you had all the others. But one of these days I shall catch you on the wrong foot. For, mark my words: sooner or later I shall find one of your victims willing to cut off his nose to spite his face, and then I shall nab you."

Without another word Grant turned. Followed by his companion, Pigott, he marched out of the house, across the portico, and into the darkness.

Wylson's expressionless face watched the two men disappear. When they were no longer in sight he turned to Tony.

"I want a little talk with you," he said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WITH A MOCKINGLY COURTEOUS GESTURE WYLSON INDICATED THE staircase. Tony glanced round at the ring of faces which surrounded him, and decided that discretion was the better part of valour. With the exception of Wylson's, every face was grim and sullen, and wore an expression which suggested that nothing would please its owner more than the opportunity of

beating up the uninvited guest. Not without reason, Tony had to admit to himself. Not only had some of the men been awakened from their first sleep, but evidently they were due for trouble in the morning.

Tony slowly ascended the stairs, followed closely by Wylson and one of the two bodyguards. Upon reaching the top of the staircase Tony halted, whereupon Wylson said:

"We will go into my study. You know the way, I believe." He spoke in a purring, formal voice more menacing in its undertones than Tony could have believed possible.

Tony pushed open all that remained of the door, and entered the study. Barbour was still at the window, automatic in hand. He stared at Tony with undisguised hostility, but said nothing.

Wylson followed Tony into the room. "You can go, Barbour. Stay on the landing. You, Raikes, go downstairs and remain on the portico."

"But what about this here man, Mr. Wylson?" Barbour questioned in surprise.

"I think I have no need to fear a physical attack from this gentleman," Wylson murmured. "Now hurry, both of you. We have much to say to each other."

The two men left reluctantly. As soon as the echo of their heavy feet was no longer to be heard Wylson pointed to the chair in front of the antique desk. "If you will take that seat, Mr. Verrell, I will take this one." He pulled the second desk chair towards him, and placed it opposite the other. The two men sat down.

"So your name is Verrell?" Wylson continued softly. "At least that is the name by which you are known to that detective, so I presume it is probably your right name, regardless of other aliases which you may or may not have. By the way, I do not think it would be out of place for you to thank me for having saved you from serving a sentence in prison."

"I see no reason for thanking you. No doubt you had your own reasons for doing what you did."

"True, true! I do nothing without reason. Well, we will waive the thanks. Now, Mr. Verrell, perhaps you will inform me as to what you are doing in this house."

Tony shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Well, it does not really matter. I think I can make a good guess." Wylson stared searchingly at Tony, and gradually his expression changed. His previous suavity vanished; his

saintly, austere face became a mask of diabolic but suppressed rage.

"So you are the young man who visited Miss Pamela Hanshew and tried to make her believe that I was the arch-fiend in disguise——"

Tony thought it useless to deny the accusation. "I said nothing about disguise," he interrupted drily.

Wylson flushed at the taunt, but otherwise ignored the remark. "For that visit alone I could kill you," he continued, still speaking in the same emotionless voice. "Unfortunately, circumstances make it impossible—for the time being. If you were reported missing I fear that interfering detective-sergeant would ask awkward-questions. So you will realize, Mr. Verrell, that the only reason for my not killing you is because I value my own skin. Otherwise, I should have no compunction."

Tony found himself believing Wylson, and for the first time began to appreciate the depths behind the millionaire's gaunt, saintly face. The very restraint in which Wylson seemed so easily able to hold himself constituted, in itself, a worse threat than any combination of words.

"Besides," Wylson continued, "I do not overlook the fact that you have accomplices. Three, at least. The young woman who accompanied you to Miss Hanshew's home, and the two men who conveyed you here tonight in the packing-case. You see, Mr. Verrell, I am, by nature, cautious. Very cautious. For that reason I am all the more curious to know how you learned that I am Jason."

In his new appreciation of Wylson's character Tony thought it characteristic of the man that he did not attempt to deny being Jason. Wylson, apparently, seemed quite confident that the admission could not harm him. The significance of this fact was not overlooked by Tony. The shadow of peril appeared to be creeping in his direction, and the feeling was not pleasant.

When Wylson realized that his visitor had no intention of responding to his indirect question, he went on quietly: "Let us understand each other, Mr. Verrell. While it may be quite true that I have no intention of killing you immediately, there are other fates worse than death. Do you comprehend my meaning?"

"No."

Wylson simulated a sigh. "A pity! I dislike melodrama,

but you force me to it. The position is, my dear young man, that I am determined to find out, firstly, how you came to discover my identity, and secondly, the names and addresses of your accomplices, that I may deal with them at my leisure. Also I am curious to know why you went to Miss Hanshew with your information, and not to me. Apparently you were not intending to blackmail her?"

"I will gladly answer your last question. My only object in betraying your secret to Pamela Hanshew was to make sure that she does not marry you."

"Why? Are you in love with her yourself?"

"Not in the slightest. I was merely out to punish you, and I found out that nothing could possibly hurt you more than to be despised by Miss Hanshew for the insect you are. Besides, my pet aversion is the marriage of young girls to men old enough to be their fathers."

This last taunt shook Wylson's equanimity. His voice wavered when he next spoke. "I shall not forget that jibe when I balance my account with you. Meanwhile, I give you one last warning. Will you answer my questions, or must I make you?"

"Make me! How?"

"How? You appear to be a man of intelligence, Mr. Verrell. You should not need telling of the centuries-old method of making people answer questions against their will."

Tony laughed. So far he had believed in Wylson's sincerity, but the millionaire's threat to use torture was so obvious a bluff that it became stupid.

"You do not believe I would go so far?" Wylson questioned.

"Of course not! The same circumstances which prevent your killing me would prevent your daring to torture me. Besides, I should bring an action against you."

"You—a housebreaker—would not dare to bring an action in Court against me, for your action would be followed by criminal proceedings against you on the charge of attempted burglary."

Feeling rather pleased with himself, Tony shook his head. "You could produce no proof of my alleged crime," he said confidently.

"Fool!" Wylson sneered. "There are half a dozen people in this house ready to prove the charge."

Tony chuckled. "You forget, Mr. Wylson, that you yourself testified to two C.I.D. men that I had leave and licence to enter and leave your house."

Seeing the angry light which blazed up in the millionaire's eyes, Tony knew he had scored a point. Almost at once, however, anger was replaced by cunning.

"Quite so! Quite so! I thank you for reminding me of that fact, which I confess had slipped my memory. Yes, indeed! I testified, did I not, that you had leave and licence to enter the house? Perhaps I do see a way of disposing of you, after all, my friend."

Once again Tony sensed intuitively that the prospect of danger had unexpectedly worsened in the past few seconds.

"In the light of my public refusal to charge you with attempted burglary—a trifling affair, and the result of a private misunderstanding between us—nobody will doubt my obvious feelings towards you, if not of friendliness, at least, shall we say, of understanding and forgiveness. In such circumstances, do you think anyone would doubt my word, and the evidence of my entire household, that you left *Three Ways* precisely thirty minutes after the departure of Detective-Sergeant Grant and his companion?"

"I do not understand."

"You are very dense, Mr. Verrell. Officially, you will be leaving this house in about fifteen minutes' time, after having shaken my hand, apologized for the misunderstanding which caused you to break into *Three Ways*, and having thanked me for my consideration and kindness in understanding your position. At the same time, you will express a fear that the detectives may not be quite so forgiving as myself, and that they may yet try to foist some other crime upon you. I shall tell you not to be so pessimistic; that the entire affair is over and done with——"

Tony could no longer restrain his patience. "Are you crazy? I shall say nothing of the sort."

"But you will, Mr. Verrell; I assure you that you will—officially. At the inquest the men I employ here will each swear on oath to having heard such a conversation, and to having seen you leave the house, walk down the drive, and disappear among the trees which surround this house."

"What inquest?"

"Yours, my dear Mr. Verrell. The inquest which will be held upon your mangled remains after they have been found splashed across the nearest Southern railway lines. During the course of giving my evidence I shall suggest—tactfully, of course—that the knowledge of having been watched by Scotland

Yard detectives preyed upon your mind to such an extent that, in a moment of mental derangement, you must have committed suicide in order to avoid the disgrace of arrest and possible imprisonment. Do you think that story will be doubted, particularly in view of the fact that I am a reputed millionaire? One of the advantages of being a millionaire lies in being believed, because nobody can think of any reason why a millionaire should lie."

Tony realized that Wylson was not bluffing. If Wylson were to give such evidence on oath it would almost certainly be accepted by the coroner and his jury, for presumably there would be no reason to doubt it. George Grant alone might distrust it—but would mere suspicion count against the sworn evidence of Wylson and his employees?

Meanwhile, Wylson continued with his monologue, as though deriving sadistic enjoyment from enlarging upon the fate which he was preparing for Tony.

"If you believe that my servants would not swear to such evidence, disabuse yourself of such hopes. Those men are mine, body and soul, purchased with gold, and retained with gold. They know too well where their interests lie to act against me and my interests. Indeed, if they thought your presence here might deprive them of their comfortable living they would be quite ready to despatch you to another world on their own accounts."

He nodded his head reflectively. "Yes, the plan is a good one. But first you are going to talk, young man. Either willingly, or . . ." His gaunt face parted in a threatening smile.

"I think you would have a hard job trying to explain why I tortured myself before committing suicide." Tony spoke in a strained, husky voice. There was a soulless, ferocious quality in the voice of the millionaire which alarmed him more than he cared to admit. This same quality was to be felt in the man's writings; behind the legal façade was the suggestion of an unscrupulous, rapacious power which meant to triumph, if necessary, by destroying all tradition, all loyalty, all faith. It was this quality which inspired the unthinking and the uneducated, but caused consternation among the erudite and the decent, those who could read between the lines while realizing that they were powerless to dam the percolating stream of virulent poison by legal methods.

Wylson had threatened nothing, suggested everything, just as he did in his pamphlets, yet Tony knew that the millionaire would use every means within his power to force his victim to reveal the information he required. Tony's skin prickled. In taking upon himself the punishment of transgressors he had prepared himself to face the danger of arrest and imprisonment, even the risk of death. The possibility of being tortured, however, had never, at any time, occurred to him. If it had done so he would have dismissed the suggestion as being too utterly fantastic for serious consideration.

He became aware that Wylson was speaking.

"I do not agree with you," he murmured. "Being mangled by a train is a fairly effectual method of concealing other—er—blemishes."

"You swine!" The words escaped from Tony's lips despite his attempt at self-control.

"My dear Mr. Verrell—" Wylson rose lazily to his feet—for the first time Tony realized how tall and thin the man was. "Before I call in Barbour and Raikes for—how shall I describe the operation politely—a cocktail? A taster? A *hors-d'œuvre*?—will you answer my questions?"

"What questions?" Tony's only reason for speaking was to gain time to think.

"Tell me how you discovered I was Jason. And give me the names of your accomplices."

"No."

"Very well!" Wylson shrugged his shoulders dispassionately, and lifted his head slightly, preparatory to shouting. Before he could do so he was interrupted by the sound of a telephone bell. An expression of surprise crossed his lean, hungry face, but instead of answering the call he continued with what he had been on the point of doing before the bell rang.

"Barbour! Raikes!"

Even above the noise of the telephone bell, which continued to ring, Tony heard the sound of heavy feet. Barbour entered the room, followed presently by Raikes.

"Watch him while I answer the call," Wylson ordered, as he walked towards the antique desk behind Tony, on which the telephone was resting. Barbour immediately crossed the room, and leaned up against the wall between the two windows, where he watched Tony with his bulging, crafty eyes. Raikes remained by the door, watchful and morose.

Wylson picked up the instrument. "Hullo!" he exclaimed sharply.

From the earpiece of the telephone Tony heard the muffled echo of words, some of which he was able to distinguish. The gaps he filled in by guesswork.

"Is that you, Wylson?"

"Yes."

"This is Bamburrg. I have just been on to La Belle Lorraine, but was told that you had returned home."

"Why are you telephoning at this time of the night?"

"I have just heard that Collins and Reid are bringing the rest of the lads tomorrow morning to pick up supplies of the new pamphlet."

"Tomorrow! I thought they were not coming until the day after tomorrow."

"So did I. It was Collins's fault; he made a mistake in the dates. I tried to persuade him to alter his arrangements, but he said it was too late. Reid has to get back to Dundee, and Perry to Glasgow."

"Did you get the text?"

"Yes, but not until the last post tonight, after all the men had gone home. What shall I do about the boys? Send them away empty-handed until next time?"

"Don't do that," Wylson ordered sharply. "I particularly want what you have in hand distributed before the week-end. It might make a lot of difference to—well, you know."

"It should, too: it's pretty hot. But it cannot be distributed by the week-end, Xavier. It cannot be printed until tomorrow."

"What is wrong with tonight?"

"Tonight! Surely you are joking? Can you see any of the compositors getting out of bed and coming back to work at this hour of the morning? They would tell me to go to hell."

"I was thinking of you."

"Me! Good heavens, Xavier, it's years since I set up type!"

Tony heard every word of the last sentence because Bamburrg shouted in his surprise.

"You have not forgotten how to, have you?"

"No, but I should be much too clumsy."

"What time are C. and the rest due?"

"The usual time. Between five-thirty and six a.m."

"Then there is time enough, even if you are slow. What do you say?"

"I do not know what to say. Besides, the text is in your handwriting, instead of being typed out."

"I sent it from town."

"I suppose, if you really want——"

"I do," Wylson maintained firmly.

"Then I suppose I had better see what I can do. All right, Xavier. I will dress, get down to the works right away, and try to get the pamphlets printed by the time the boys arrive."

"Do your best."

"I will. Good night."

"Good night."

Wylson replaced the telephone on its stand. Barbour began to move away from the windows; Raikes turned towards the door.

"Wait a minute, boys."

The two men halted abruptly, and glanced at their employer.

"You see Mr. Verrell there?"

Raikes nodded. Barbour said "Yes."

"He left five minutes ago, after apologizing to me for breaking into the house. It was all due to a misunderstanding, and he thanked me for not taking his offence in good part. He was rather frightened of what that detective might do to him after leaving here, but I told him to forget the whole matter, and not worry. Do you understand?"

In other circumstances Tony would have laughed at the comical expression which crossed the faces of the two men. They stared at Wylson as if wondering whether he had suddenly become insane. Then Barbour smiled broadly, exposing a row of tobacco-stained teeth.

"Of course we saw him leave, didn't we, Bill? Wasn't a bad little bloke neither, though he seemed to have the fair wind-up about something or other."

Bill Raikes nodded unsmilingly. "I told him not to be frightened of no ruddy copper if he hadn't done nothing wrong."

Barbour would have continued, but Wylson made a gesture, and the words remained still-born.

"Now boys, see if you can solve this problem. Mr. Verrell, having left this house, won't talk. But I want him to talk. What is the answer?"

Barbour's bulgy eyes became devilish; once again he displayed

his ugly teeth. He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and put one in his mouth.

"I once found a lighted cigarette useful——" he began.

Wylson shook his head. "No marks to be left in case the police might become too curious."

"In that case——" Raikes's morose face did not change expression. "A needle up the quick of the nail," he suggested tonelessly. "Or a long pin."

"An excellent suggestion," Wylson congratulated suavely. "Especially as I have a pin in one of the desk drawers. You two hold him while I find it."

Tony crouched back in his chair as the two bodyguards advanced towards him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT WAS NOT FEAR WHICH MADE TONY CROUCH BACK AGAINST THE chair, but an attempt to put his captors off their guard by making them believe that he was too paralysed with fright to attempt an escape. Whatever happened, he knew he was in for a bad period. That much was apparent from the exulting light in Barbour's codfish eyes; from the grim, unsmiling determination of Raikes's lips; and the confident expression which transfigured Wylson's attenuated features.

Were the men bluffing, in an endeavour to make him disclose the information? Despite the urging of his common sense, which refused to believe that a man could be tortured here, amid the peace and serenity of rustic England; despite their obvious gloating, Tony could not persuade himself that the men were bluffing. But even if they were, he was sure that he was in for a severe beating-up. To offer resistance, which could only be futile considering the odds, would only make matters worse for him. On the other hand, if he simulated cowardice and fear they might, with luck, involuntarily offer him an opportunity to escape.

One thought dominated all others. If only he could reach the window through which he had already jumped—unfortunately it had been closed, and the curtains drawn—one quick leap would take him on to the portico roof, and a second on to the

flower-bed, as before. That one or both of the bodyguards would leap out after him was certain, but his familiarity with the jump, through having done it once before that night, might give him a precious few seconds' start.

Raikes, advancing from his left, grabbed Tony's left shoulder with one hand and his wrist with the other. The man's fingers pressed into his shoulder with the force of something solid; the hand which gripped his wrist crushed and squeezed with a fierce strength which not only made him gasp, but which told him that Raikes alone would be capable of pinning him to the chair. Meanwhile Barbour gripped Tony's right wrist with his left hand and placed one heavy knee across Tony's thighs; with his right hand he threatened his victim's stomach with the automatic, which he continued to hold in his right.

Tony's instinctive desire was to tense himself for some sort of a struggle, however unequal the odds against him; but with a determined effort he restrained the impulse, and forced his body and limbs to go limp. That the effort was not without result was proved by Barbour's sneering laugh.

"You won't have much trouble with this guy, Mr. Wylson," he announced hoarsely. "He is already scared out of his pants."

Tony stared desperately across the room at the hundreds of books which lined the wall. Barbour's knee was boring painfully into the lower part of his stomach, and felt like a ton weight. How could he free himself from the pressing incubus, and of Raikes's steel-like fingers? Even if he were to wriggle free, how was he to avoid the deadly pellet which Barbour's trigger finger itched to plunge into his body?

"So much the easier for him," Wylson said, from behind, where he was looking for the pin. "The quick of the nail is a most painful place to wound. Ah! Here is the one I have been looking for. I shall be with you in a few seconds now, Mr. Verrell."

Tony realized that Wylson was deliberately wasting time in order to enhance the pain of torture, so he tried not to dwell upon that aspect of his coming ordeal. He was fascinated by the blue-nosed automatic. If only there were some way by which he could knock the weapon from Barbour's hand, and free himself at the same time, he would ask no more than twelve seconds—no, six—diversion so that he might reach the window, fling it open, and leap out into the darkness. The automatic was so near—almost within reach of his hand if he could sit up—and yet

so far, for both his arms were powerless. How could he hope to wriggle free without their use?

Wylson walked slowly round the group and stood in front of Tony.

"Well, young man, have you changed your mind?"

"No," Tony gasped: he had little breath left to do more than gasp—the knee was pressing more and more heavily into him.

Wylson held the pin close to Tony's eyes. "As you can see, this is a long thin pin. It will pierce your flesh for some distance. I feel sure it will be painful. Your last chance, Mr. Verrell. Will you speak voluntarily, or must I make you?"

Tony slipped farther down the chair until the small of his back protruded beyond the edge; he doubled up his feet.

"No," he repeated.

"He's squirming in anticipation," Barbour chortled. "One dose ought to do the trick."

"Give me his hand, Raikes."

Raikes exerted pressure, and forced Tony's arm up to the level of Wylson's waist. Wylson selected the middle finger, inserted the point of the pin between the nail and the flesh and gave the head a jab.

At that moment Tony took a desperate gamble. To the accompaniment of a terrifying yell of pain, which was mostly deliberate, but partly involuntary, he doubled his body and kicked upwards and inwards with all the power of his springing muscles. The effort was further spurred by the spasm of pain which shot up his finger and arm and rasped his nerves. The combination of noise, surprise and force was completely successful. His left foot shot into Raikes's face; his right kicked the automatic out of Barbour's hand.

With a shout of pain that mingled with Tony's, Raikes involuntarily let go of the squirming body in the chair and reeled away, his senses bemused, his vision obscured by the tears forced out of his eyes by the impact of a heavy toe-cap on the bridge of his nose. Barbour, meanwhile, pitched right forward into Wylson as his knee was robbed of its support. His head caught the millionaire fairly in the stomach. As Wylson doubled up, the bodyguard completed the débâcle by catching Wylson round the knees in an effort to save himself from the floor. As a consequence Wylson lost his balance and pitched sideways on to the floor, Barbour sprawling across his feet.

The momentum of the kick meanwhile had knocked the chair

backwards. As it crashed on to the floor Tony completed the backward somersault and landed on his knees. The snub-nosed automatic which he had kicked out of Barbour's hand lay on the floor, close to his hand. With a grin of triumph for a trick that had been far more successful than he had dared hope, Tony grabbed the gun and ran for the window.

As he flung back the curtains Barbour sat up. He realized what was happening and shouted to Raikes to shoot while he grubbed about the floor, searching for his own weapon. Raikes fumbled for his gun, but as he pulled it from his pocket Tony threw up the lower sash of the window. Through his tears Raikes saw a vague, formless figure climb on to the window-sill. With the back of his left hand he hurriedly wiped away the impeding moisture. By the time his vision was clear there was nobody to shoot.

II

Tony landed safely on the flower-bed. This time no firm hand fell upon his shoulder, no toneless voice pronounced words of arrest. Without a second's pause he streaked off into the darkness, anxious only to put as great a distance as possible between himself and *Three Ways* before the three men in Wylson's study recovered their equilibrium.

Soon he was gasping and heaving with shortness of breath, and a violent stitch which was the result of Barbour's knee having pressed so cruelly into his stomach. Unable to keep up the mad pace, he slowed down and glanced behind him. Against a black background the lighted window shone out like a leering, basilisk eye, but otherwise he saw nothing. He continued across the smooth lawn at an easier pace, confident now that he had every prospect of escape.

His confidence proved well founded. He gained, first, the blessed shelter of the belt of trees which surrounded *Three Ways*, and then the road. During the intervening minutes there was no suggestion of pursuit. He was not altogether surprised. Wylson was wise enough not to risk publicity by indulging in a futile chase. Besides, the millionaire was no worse off than he had been before Tony's visit.

As soon as he reached the road Tony dropped his pace to that of a steady walk as he made his way towards the old farm-shed where the hired car awaited him. His thoughts were not bitter

—he had hoped much from his plan to search Wylson's study, but from the beginning he had been prepared for disappointment, though not for the turn which events had taken ; as if to remind him of that turn the finger into which Wylson had jammed the pin throbbed with pain. However, that was over and done with. So much worse might have happened to him, but had not. He had gambled and lost. It was up to him to accept defeat like a sportsman.

But had he lost ? As he walked along the dark road, and flashed his torch to make sure of not walking into the ditch, a new but nebulous plan began to take shape in his brain. Item by item he analysed and dissected it, and presently, as its feasibility became more and more apparent, his eyes lighted with enthusiasm, and his familiar, happy grin slowly parted his lips. Perhaps his visit to *Three Ways* had not been wasted, after all. Perhaps it might prove a blessing in disguise. If so, his painful finger would have been well worth the while.

His pace became speedier. If his plan were to succeed he had to work quickly. He hurried on ; soon he was moving at a jog-trot. Consequently the stitch returned. He defied and defeated it. Time was more precious than the stitch. So much more precious, indeed, that presently he found himself actually running. His feet echoed weirdly on the quiet road, and he hoped that no rural policeman was in the neighbourhood. Even the most slow-witted of constables would want to investigate the sound of running feet at that hour of the morning.

Apparently all policemen were elsewhere, for he reached the shed without being challenged. Using caution, although the nearest building was some distance away, he opened the shed doors. Then he felt his way to the off-side of the car, stepped into the driving-seat, and switched on the dashboard light.

There was a movement from behind him. As he turned in alarm a pair of soft arms were flung round his neck, and a soft cheek was pressed against his.

"Oh, Tony ! At last !" In those four words were revealed all the anguish and distress of Penelope's long wait.

"Penny ! What in heaven's name are you doing here ?" For all the warmth which flooded his body at the feel of her cheek pressing against his there was a note of reproof in his voice, for he was disturbed by the realization of what she must have suffered during his long absence.

Impulsively she pressed her lips gently against his forehead.

"Please do not be cross with me, Tony. I made Jerry bring me, so that I could meet you. I—I hadn't the patience to wait until the morning to learn what had happened to you."

"You haven't been so worried before when I have been out on similar jaunts."

"You have never been out on one quite—quite like the one tonight. It was—different. Perhaps the knowledge that you were breaking into a house filled with men worried me, or perhaps my intuition warned me that I had reason to fear Xavier Wylson."

"Your intuition was right, Penny," he confirmed grimly.

"Tony! What happened?" Once again her voice filled with alarm, and she climbed over the back of the front seat so that she could sit by his side.

"He returned home."

"Why? Why? What happened?"

"I think Wylson's secretary must have been quite sure that his employer wouldn't do anything so unusual as ordering a statue without warning the household to expect its arrival, and he must have 'phoned up to town. At any rate, Wylson came tearing home in a wild rush."

"But what happened?" she repeated anxiously.

He tried not to tell her, but she insisted upon his doing so. Then he tried to gloss over some of the unpleasant details, but her instinct warned her that he was concealing something, and she forced him to reveal the whole truth. When he related what Wylson had done to his finger she gasped her dismay, caught hold of his left hand, lifted it to her face, and pressed her lips gently against the tip of the wounded finger. For the second time that night he decided that what he had suffered was well worth the consequences.

As she took her lips away from his fingertip he found two warm splashes upon his hand. He dared not trust himself to speak, or even to think, for he wanted desperately to crush her in his arms, and to tell her all the things he had longed to say from the day of their first meeting.

While he was still struggling to retain his self-control, Penelope released his hand and said, in a matter-of-fact voice in which there was only the suspicion of a tremor: "Now take me home, please, Tony dear."

With a chill of disappointment he realized that the vital moment had passed in which he might have succeeded in over-

coming her determination not to be swayed by her emotions. With a sigh of regret he answered her in the same manner:

"I am not ready to go home, my sweet."

"Tony! You are not going back into that horrible house! I won't let you. I won't! You have failed once. You would fail again. Xavier Wylson is too clever for us: you will never find any proof that he is Jason."

"I know where that proof is to be obtained, Penny. At a certain building on the outskirts of Croydon."

A note of excitement crept into her voice. "What do you mean?"

"Listen, Penny. While I was sitting close to Wylson's desk the telephone rang. I was able to hear most of what the person at the other end said, because his voice was the type which you can hear some distance away from the earpiece."

"Yes, I know. What did you hear?"

"Bamburr's voice. He phoned Wylson to say that the distributors of the pamphlets were arriving at five-thirty this morning, instead of the day after tomorrow, and what was he to do about it? Wylson was annoyed; he had written the pamphlet especially to be distributed the coming week-end. When he insisted that the pamphlet was to be printed before five-thirty this morning Bamburr said that was impossible because none of the printing staff would get up and work at that time of night. So Wylson told Bamburr that he must set it up himself. Bamburr is there now, Penny, probably alone in the printing works, setting up Wylson's latest pamphlet."

"Tony! What are you intending to do?"

"Break into the building, and force Bamburr to hand over Wylson's text."

Penelope gasped. "What good would that do, Tony?"

"Wylson wrote the text of the pamphlet in town, and sent it to Bamburr in his own handwriting."

"Tony! Oh, Tony! That would be perfect evidence. But Bamburr would never let you have the original."

Tony fingered Barbour's automatic which weighed down his pocket. "Won't he?" He laughed gaily. "We shall see. Everybody makes at least one mistake, Penny dear. I have a feeling that Wylson made his when he neglected to type out his latest pamphlet. And now——" His voice became intensely serious. "Now for Croydon." He switched on the headlights and pressed the self-starter. The engine chattered into life.

As soon as it had warmed up he drove the car on to the road and headed for Croydon. Soon the needle of the speedometer was quivering on the forty m.p.h. mark.

"Penny," Tony said presently, "have you a scrap of paper in your handbag?"

She reflected for a second. "The back of a letter. Will that do?"

"Fine. Here is a pencil. Would you write something down for me?"

She took the pencil from him. "Now what are you planning?" she demanded.

"Jason's demise!" he answered shortly. "Are you ready? Then write down this . . ."

III

With much sweating and considerable cursing, Bamburr had struggled for more than an hour and a half with the thankless task of setting up the type for Jason's latest. At first he had worked slowly, but after a while his old skill returned, and as the work neared its end, so he became speedier. At least he was satisfied that his work was almost as good as one could expect in the circumstances, so he locked the type up in a chase preparatory to pulling a proof.

He straightened his back, and wiped the sweat from his fat red face and his thick red neck.

"That's that!" he exclaimed aloud.

"I don't think so," said a voice immediately behind him.

With a gasp of alarm Bamburr swung round, and the sight he presented was so ludicrous that Tony had to laugh. Bamburr had dressed, but only after a fashion. His collarless, tieless shirt had its top button undone; above the shirt he wore a black alpaca coat and a brown sweater, which was far too small for his protruding stomach. He wore grey flannel trousers. To complete the outfit his feet were encased in woolly slippers. Funniest of all, his right cheek was beautifully smeared with printer's ink.

While Tony laughed, Bamburr's mouth opened in alarm, for he caught sight of the automatic which was aimed at his fat stomach with disconcerting significance.

"What do you want? What are you doing here? How did you get in?" he quavered.

"Answering your questions in the reverse order, I entered by using a door which opened when I turned the handle. Evidently it was the one by which you had entered. Fortunately for me, you had neglected to lock or bolt it. As to what I am doing here, the truth is that I came here to see you, Mr. Bamburrg."

"Then you know me!" The knowledge alarmed Bamburrg more than ever—perhaps he had a guilty conscience, Tony reflected. "I do not know you. Who are you? How did you know that I was here?"

"To judge by the number of questions you ask you seem very avid for information," Tony mocked. "Although your first question still remains unanswered you have asked two more. Well, the last two I do not propose answering, my dear Mr. Bamburrg. But the first is a different matter. What do I want?" Tony's manner changed abruptly. "Step back six paces," he ordered roughly. "Go on, get back six paces, before I blow a hole in your bloated body and rid you of some of that overrich blood of yours."

Filled with apprehension, Bamburrg hastily stepped backwards, not six paces but nearly twice as many. No doubt he would have exceeded even that number, but he hit the wall with a thump which forced a groan of misery from his fat lips.

While Bamburrg retreated Tony advanced towards the type-case frame. There, beside a case of type, he saw the precious slip of paper for which he had risked so much: a sheet of lined foolscap paper, filled on both sides with small, precise handwriting, and signed 'Jason'.

If Pamela was familiar with Wylson's handwriting—as Tony did not doubt she was, in the light of the letters from her which he had seen in the secret drawer of Wylson's desk—she could ask for no more damning evidence than the foolscap sheet to convince her that Xavier Wylson and Jason were one and the same man. With warm, bubbling satisfaction for the impulsive thought which had prompted him to visit the printing works, Tony grabbed the manuscript and began carefully to fold it.

This sight aroused Bamburrg to a show of courage. He stepped two paces away from the wall. "Put that paper down!" he croaked. "Damn you! Put that back where you found it!"

"Nonsense!" Tony exclaimed gaily, for now that he had secured proof against Wylson his mood was light-hearted, happy. "Didn't I tell you that this is what I came for? Is it likely that I shall give it back to you just for the asking?"

"Please give it back to me, mister," Bamburrg pleaded, and advanced towards Tony—evidently he was even more terrified of what Wylson might do and say to him than he was of the threatening automatic. "I will pay you good money for that sheet of paper. Lots of money. Give it to me, mister. In heaven's name give it to me!"

"Stay where you are!" Tony warned sharply, for the other man continued to move towards him. "I haven't finished with you yet."

"Oh, heavens! What do you mean?" Bamburrg moaned.

"I want half a dozen copies of what you have just set up, on the special paper you keep for Jason's pamphlets."

"No! no! I won't print them! I won't! I can't!" Desperation turned Bamburrg's attitude into one verging on courage.

The gaiety slowly disappeared from Tony's face as he realized that he would have to bully the printer into submission. He screwed up his features into what he hoped was a menacing expression.

"You will do what I order, Bamburrg, or——" He slowly raised the automatic until its muzzle pointed directly at the space between the other man's eyes.

"Don't shoot! Please, mister, don't shoot!" Beads of sweat began to appear on Bamburrg's forehead: beneath the redness of his cheeks his flesh became tinged with a greeny-yellow hue.

"Will you do what I tell you?"

The other man hesitated before answering, but for no longer than two seconds.

"Yes," he agreed huskily—"if you won't shoot."

"Then get on with the job," Tony rasped.

It did not take long for Bamburrg to produce the proofs—a few seconds for the rollers to spread the ink evenly across the ink slab, and a few minutes for the machine to print a small number of pamphlets.

Tony took a handful of these and thrust them into a pocket. Then he glanced at his watch and frowned. Time—as usual, precious time—was passing. From another pocket he pulled out the letter which Penelope had found in her handbag.

"Now," he ordered harshly, as he thrust the paper towards Bamburrg. "Set that up, and print it."

With a shaking hand Bamburrg took hold of the paper and began to read. Less than a minute later it dropped from his helpless fingers and fluttered slowly to the floor.

"No!" he shrieked hysterically. "I won't print it! Shoot and be damned to you! I won't print *that*! I won't! I won't! I won't!" He dropped on to his knees, and held up his arms, imploring mercy.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BAMBURRG EVIDENTLY CONSIDERED HIS PRESENT PLIGHT A LESSER evil than the one in which he would find himself if he obeyed Tony's instructions, and Tony realized that the printer would need firm handling. Gone was the time for using kid gloves. If he wished to take advantage of an opportunity which was unlikely ever to occur again, he must inspire the craven Bamburrg with fear of immediate death.

Tony had no false illusions about himself. He knew he was bluffing; he could no more kill Bamburrg than fly—and his lips twitched ruefully at the out-of-date adage; if ace night fighter, ex-Squadron-Leader Anthony Verrell could not fly, who else could? Nevertheless, Bamburrg must not be allowed to suspect that the intruder's bark was worse than his bite, otherwise an chance of putting an end to Jason's future political activities would be utterly and irretrievably ruined.

To achieve his object Tony tried to reverse the sands of time by convincing himself that he was not in a Croydon printing works, but in a night-flying fighter aircraft; that the man in front of him was not on the floor, but sitting in the pilot's seat of an enemy Junkers 88, on its way to drop bombs on the innocent women and children of a peaceful British town or village. At the same time he lifted up his foot, and placing it against Bamburrg's fat chest, pushed with his full force.

With a squeal of fear and pain Bamburrg sprawled backwards and gazed up at Tony with increasing terror.

"Get up, and get on with the job," Tony shouted roughly.

To Bamburrg the face of the stranger was that of a killer, and his defiance collapsed. He scrambled to his feet, mouthing a whimpering: "I'll do it, mister! Don't shoot! I'll do what you say!"

"Pick up that paper," Tony ordered.

Bamburrg complied with a gasp, this time not of fear but from the strain of bending. He placed the paper by a case of type, put a solid piece of lead on top to keep it there, selected a

composing-stick, and began his task of setting up the few verses of crude doggerel which Penelope and Tony had strung together on their way to Croydon.

Considering the shape of his pudgy, over-manicured fingers, Bamburrg did his work with a swiftness and dexterity which surprised Tony. Line by line the composing-stick filled up until first one verse was completed, then a second. Meanwhile, the hands of Tony's watch were moving inexorably towards the hour when the first of the distributors was to be expected.

"Where do Collins, Reid and the others pick up the pamphlets as a general rule?" Tony asked unexpectedly.

The printer's surprise was such that his trembling fingers dropped the character which he had just selected from its box, and turned towards Tony.

"What do you know of Collins and Reid?" he quavered miserably.

"Get on with the work," Tony ordered harshly. Bamburrg hastily complied, so Tony continued: "I know they are due at five-thirty to collect the latest edition of Jason's poison."

"Oh, lord!" Bamburrg wailed miserably. "Oh, lord! Oh, lord!"

"Do they usually come here?"

Bamburrg did not reply. Tony pressed the muzzle of the automatic into the man's bulging sides. "Do they usually come here?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Then they are due here in little more than two hours' time?"

"Yes. Oh, lord! Yes."

"How do they come into the building? Through the door which you and I used?"

• "No. The door we used opens in from the yard. The door they will use——"

"Wait a moment. Is that your car in the yard?"

"Yes."

"Go on. What about the door they will use?"

"It is a side door leading into Mermaid Street. Collins has the key to it."

"And once they are inside the building?"

"They come up to this floor by way of a side staircase, and enter this room by that door over there." Bamburrg pointed with an unsteady hand towards the door in question. "Usually they find the pamphlets done up in parcels of different sizes, and

stacked on that counter beside the door. When they have collected the parcels they leave again, locking the door behind them."

"Does that mean that nobody is here as a rule when they come for the pamphlets?"

"Sometimes I am here, but nobody else is."

"I suppose 'sometimes' means those days on which you pay them for doing the dirty work of beginning the distribution of the pamphlets?"

"Yes."

"Right! Now listen to me—no, don't stop; get on with your work—and do everything I tell you, or, by heavens, Bamburr, I'll shoot, even if Collins, Reid and a dozen other men are in this room. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, yes."

"As soon as you have the type set up you will lock it up, put it on the machine and run off your usual number, and what is more, you will print them on Jason's special paper."

"No, mister, make it ordinary paper—I can put my hand on some—"

"Don't be a fool, Bamburr. The special paper will prove that the pamphlet is by Jason, and nobody else."

"But it isn't—"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, lord! Oh, lord!" Tears of despair welled from Bamburr's eyes and rolled down his bloated cheeks.

"As soon as the pamphlets are printed you will make them into the usual-sized parcels, and stack them up there on the counter. Then you and I will stay here while the parcels are collected. This automatic will be in my pocket, but I shall keep my finger on the trigger. You realize what that will mean to you if you make one false move?"

"I won't, mister," Bamburr hastened to reassure Tony. "I'll do what you say."

"When the men arrive you will tell them that the pamphlet is one of Jason's hottest, and that he wants it specially distributed as soon as possible—"

"Wylson will kill me for saying that," the printer quavered piteously.

"You mean he may, whereas I will if you don't give them that message." Tony glanced at his watch. The time available was quickly running out. "Get a move on," he ordered curtly. "I've done all the talking I need do."

Amid an uneasy silence Bamburrg proceeded with his job. At last all the verses were set up, the type locked in a chase, and the printer carried the forme across to the machine and substituted it for the one he had locked in a short time previously. Then he started the machine and, when the ink was evenly distributed, ran six copies off, and stopped the machine. One of the proofs he passed across to Tony.

With glowing eyes Tony read :

My brains you admitted
 When idiots I pilloried
 Who gave all with selfless devotion.
 I twisted their pure aims,
 Urged your untrue claims
 To profit from puerile commotion.

I had you incited,
 The torch was well lighted
 To guide me, onward and up.
 And dreams of my power
 That grew with each hour
 Threatened to o'erflow my cup.

My aims seemed quite right,
 My methods gave light,
 None guessed my flagrant ambition.
To command and to rule,
To grind every fool
 In the slough of his own inhibition.

My heart now is changed,
 With decency rangéd
 For Cupid hath dealt me a blow.
 In deference to love
 I become as a dove
 To repent me, my soul full of woe.

As Jason you followed me,
 Read me, believed me,
 Yet here is my own true confession,
 I'm slimy, I'm tainted,
 More black than I'm painted,
 A louse in a stinking profession.

That name was adopted,
 Slyly and falsely,
 To crucify Britain, the saviour
 Deride it and taunt it,
 No longer I flaunt it,
 My alias for Wylson, Xavier.

Bamburr groaned with misery as he, too, read the proof. Cowardly he might be, but he was not without intelligence, so he realized as well as Tony what effect the doggerel would have upon all but the most fanatical of Jason's followers. At the first reading the people would frown with perplexity, at the second they would chuckle. With the third reading would come a full-throated roar of amusement, and, possibly, enlightenment. From that moment Jason's power would be gone for ever. Stripped of the anonymity which had helped to make his particular type of political ranting attractive to so many, a laughing-stock for the world to jibe at, Jason would quickly become a discredited prophet.

"That will do. Print it," Tony ordered curtly.

"It needs correction," the printer pointed out eagerly. "Look at that word; these two letters have dropped; the spacing is bad, the alignment irregular; that *i* and *e* have to be transposed——"

With an ugly gesture Tony stopped the other man. For the first time Bamburr had spoken with a ring of sincerity in his voice, prompted, no doubt, by a printer's genuine pride in his work. But every minute was precious; there was no time to make the job a perfect one; it was good enough to achieve its effect.

"It will do."

With a gesture of regret Bamburr set the machine working again; soon the pile of printed copies began to mount. Meanwhile the hands of Tony's watch moved on towards zero hour. Four-fifteen. Four-thirty. Four-forty-five. Five o'clock. Five-five. Five-ten.

"Finished," Bamburr announced breathlessly.

"Pack them."

The printer made two journeys to carry the heavy pile of pamphlets to the counter, while Tony watched every move of the other man to see that, at the last moment, Bamburr did not rob him of the success now so near at hand. At the same time he helped himself to a pile of the printed sheets, for circulation to Members of Parliament and to the Press. Tony knew with what joy the pamphlets would be received in both quarters. How the world would laugh at Xavier Wylson before many more hours had passed!

Bamburr began to parcel the pamphlets. He tried to waste time by doing the work clumsily and slowly (in this task he had

no professional pride), but Tony drove the other man on with bullying threats and words. Even so the parcelling was still unfinished when, at five-thirty-three, they heard from the other side of the door the echo of heavy boots on uncarpeted stone steps.

"Get him to help with the parcelling, and don't forget my instructions," Tony ordered sharply, as he dropped the automatic into his pocket.

A boot thrust open the side door; a man entered. He looked surprised at seeing Bamburrg, with a stranger close behind.

"Hullo, guv! Didn't expect to see you this morning.

Tony kicked Bamburrg's ankle. "Special job, Collins," the printer mumbled, "Jason wants it distributed as soon as possible. Give me a hand with the parcelling."

Collins glanced queerly at Tony, as though wondering what the stranger was doing there, and why he was not giving a hand with the work. He said nothing, though, and began to help Bamburrg. A minute later he whistled loudly.

"In the name of old Harry, what is this, old cock?"

Bamburrg glanced cunningly at Tony, but Tony gave no sign of being disconcerted by the question, and touched his pocket suggestively.

"Don't ask me! His own idea," Bamburrg answered miserably.

Collins scratched his head. "Damned if I get it!" But he went on with his job of wrapping up and tying supplies of the pamphlet. Less than a minute later another man entered, and another. And, later, another. And then Reid, with the sixth close behind. As the door closed behind the sixth man a motor-horn blared out once, twice, thrice.

The danger signal from Penelope!

Tony groaned. Surely he was not to be robbed of victory at this eleventh hour.

"What the thundering 'ell is that?" one of the men asked.

Reid dashed for the window on the far side of the room.

"Gawd!" he yelled. "Police!"

Bamburrg leered triumphantly at Tony—intuitively he assumed that Tony had more reason to be afraid of the police than himself—but Tony's brain reacted as swiftly. Before the printer could say a word Tony called out:

"The damn' coppers are after those pamphlets. Get them out of here as quickly as you can. I'll keep the police quiet until all of you are away."

The appeal was a cunning one, for it at once put Tony on their side against the police. He was one of them, so they didn't stop to ask why the police should want the pamphlets, or whence came Tony's knowledge. Disregarding Bamburr's frantic appeals, they grabbed the parcels and what was left of the loose pamphlets, and made for the door by which they had recently entered.

They were too late. As Collins went to push the door open with his foot it was opened by two uniformed policemen, who stalked into the room, stood just inside the doors, and told the men to "Now, then, put that stuff down."

Sullenly, the men turned to do so. For Tony the moment was a desperate one—so he acted desperately. Pulling out his automatic, he pointed it at the policemen.

"Get out of the way!" he barked.

The two policemen looked startled, but they stood their ground. "Don't be a fool, mate. Cut out that sort of stuff. It won't get you anywhere, except the Moor."

From behind him Tony heard the sound of more feet approaching the door which opened out on to the main stairway. He did not doubt that more policemen were approaching.

"Will you stand aside, or must I shoot?" he threatened in a strained, desperate voice.

The constables were brave men, but they were not prepared to throw away their lives needlessly. Cautiously remaining alert, they began slowly to stand away from the door.

"In the middle of the room."

As the policemen moved forward Tony backed away so as to keep them covered. Meanwhile, Collins made a dash for the side door, followed by his companions. As they did so four men entered the other door, two more policemen in uniform, and two men in plain clothes—Detective-Sergeant Grant and Detective-Constable Pigott.

Grant summed up the situation immediately. "Stop those men!" he yelled—he was convinced that they were Tony's accomplices. At the same moment he made a dash in their direction, threading his way through the various machines and presses, followed by Pigott and the two other policemen.

Tony moved half right to cover the newcomers.

"Stand where you are, Grant, and you others, or I'll open up."

The desperation in his voice communicated itself to Grant, who slowed up.

"What are you up to, man?" he shouted back in a voice regretful and appealing. "Don't you realize what you are doing?"

From the corner of his eye Tony saw the side door swing shut behind the last of the men.

"Holding you up with a pretty good weapon," he replied in a voice once again animated with his old, attractive gaiety. "Of course, a Browning machine-gun would be even more effective, but this will do to go on with."

"You won't get away with that funny business this time," Grant said harshly. "Using armed force to obstruct the police in the execution of their duty——"

From the street outside came the sound of an engine revving up, and the spluttering of an exhaust as a vehicle was driven away at speed.

"Give me that weapon," Grant ordered.

The sound of the exhaust died away in the distance. Tony laughed gaily and relaxed.

"All right, old cock. You can have it. Catch!" He threw the automatic to Grant, who dexterously caught it. "It's unloaded, anyway."

"What!"

"Look for yourself."

Grant snapped open the breech, then slammed the weapon down on a nearby table.

"Well, you have your nerve, Mr. Verrell. Your friends have got away, but you won't."

"They were not my friends."

"But you helped them to get away——" Grant swung round to face Bamburrg.

"Who are you?"

"Hugo Everard Bamburrg."

"Bamburrg! The owner of this printing works?"

"Yes."

"Is this man here with your leave and licence?"

"He is *not*," Bamburrg snarled—a bully now that the police were by his side.

"Are you ready to charge him?"

"With anything you say."

Grant turned back to Tony again. "That settles you, Mr. Verrell. Are you ready to come quietly?"

"Yes, but will you do me a favour first?"

"What is it?"

"How did you know I was here?"

"I thought, somehow, that you wouldn't be satisfied with remaining quiet for the rest of the night, so I left Piggott behind. He followed you on foot to the farm-shed where Miss Sladen had that car waiting for you, and overheard enough of your conversation to know that you proposed to visit a printing works in Croydon. Then he telephoned me, and I picked him up. Unfortunately, the car broke down five minutes later. Otherwise we should have been here before, so luck is on the side of your friends if it isn't on yours."

"I have told you once, those men were not my friends."

"Who were they, then?"

"They were the men who distribute Jason's pamphlets."

"What!" Grant's expression changed. He stared at Tony.

"Jason! Bamburrg! Now I know why the name Bamburrg is familiar. He prints all Jason's pamphlets."

"He did. Somehow, I don't think he will print any more."

"Why not?"

"You know how I have dealt with certain other gentry?"

"Yes."

"Now I have dealt with Jason."

For some moments Grant said nothing, but continued to stare at Tony with an expressionless face.

"How?" he asked at last.

"By making our friend Bamburrg print that pamphlet over there. Within a few hours' time copies of it will be reaching every corner of the British Isles."

Grant took up a copy of the pamphlet and began to read.

"Good lord!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Xavier Wylson—Jason—Good lord!" he repeated in a bewildered voice. Then he added: "Now I am beginning to understand. But what made him write this? This pamphlet will ruin him politically."

"I am afraid he didn't write it."

"Then—then who did?" Tony did not have to answer, for Grant comprehended. "You?"

"Yes."

Grant carefully folded up the copy of the pamphlet and put it into his pocket. Then he handed one to each of his companions.

"I am going to admit candidly, Mr. Verrell, that I am glad the car broke down. There is a hell of a lot I would have done to put that swine Jason in his place. But now——" his voice

became regretful. "I have my duty to do. You must come with me to the station. Are you ready?"

Tony nodded.

Once again Grant turned to Bamburr. "Meanwhile, Mr. Bamburr——"

Tony did not hear what the sergeant had to say to Bamburr, for he noticed suddenly that all the police constables—and Pigott also—were busily chuckling over the copies of the pamphlet which Grant had handed round, while Grant himself had foolishly turned his back. The opportunity was heaven-sent. No more than six paces would carry him to the side door through which Collins and the other men had escaped.

Tony had reached the door before any of the police realized what had happened. He was half-way down the flight before Grant reached the landing above. There, in his anxiety to hurry after Tony, Grant tripped over, and for a few precious seconds obstructed the progress of the other pursuers. A few seconds only, but enough. As Tony hurriedly dodged through the ground-floor rooms on his way to the courtyard where Penelope and the car awaited him he heard Grant call out: "I'll get you next time, as sure as my name is George Grant."

It was not until Penny and he had nearly reached Old Windsor that Tony realized what every schoolboy knows: that "Are you ready?" is usually followed by the word—"Go!"

THE END

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With the publication of *Black-shirt* in 1925, Bruce Graeme, portrayed above, made his name. The book went into nineteen impressions, and up to the outbreak of war it had sold close on half a million copies.

Bruce Graeme is a persistent traveller and he combines business and pleasure in his frequent journeys to the United States and various European countries. He is particularly fond of Paris and until the war he had a tiny apartment in the Montmartre district.

When in England he lives in an Elizabethan farmhouse in the Weald of Kent, where his leisure is actively occupied in running a small farm. His second great interest is the law and he is reading for the Bar.